

August 28, 2022

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost

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Who do you turn to for wisdom? Is there someone in your life who gives you advice, even when you haven't asked for it? Some of us might recall Dear Abby, or Ann Landers - twin advice columnists published in every major newspaper across the country from the 1950's through the 1980's. They were experts in assessing the everyday challenges of life, and became well known for their sound, compassionate, firm and practical advice, offered with a moral sensibility and delivered with the straightforward style of a good friend. They were immensely popular, because it seemed, everyone could use some good advice.

Today, we encounter Jesus as he takes in the situation before him, and offers some advice of his own. But Jesus isn't Dear Abby. He hasn't come into the world to teach us good manners or how to craft a seating chart. His guidance didn't just pop into his head, but is wisdom that is both contemporary and timeless - dare we say, divine? Rather, when Jesus wraps up the first part of his parable with the words, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" he is advising us about how to take the ordinary messiness of our lives and put it in the context of discipleship. Supported by the wisdom of Proverbs 25:6-7 that counsels one to not put themselves forward in the king's presence, because it is better to be told, "Come up here" than to be put lower in the presence of a noble, Jesus gives advice that has been foundational to his own lived faith—advice to step back, to observe, and to act with intentional humility.

For you see, God has always counseled God's people: to extend themselves in care to one another with grace; to be present to who is sitting in the room and who is sitting on the margins; to extend welcome and inclusion that ensures that all are fed—literally and spiritually. These are the same qualities extended to us, by God, for God's desire has always been, and will always be, that the lowly be raised up, that the oppressed be set free, that the table be expanded. And this begins with us.

Our gospel finds Jesus gathering with his disciples and other religious leaders on the Sabbath, but this time as the honored dinner guest of a prominent Pharisee. All are watching him closely - scrutinizing him, uncertain of what he might next say or do. And Jesus is doing some observing of his own.

Looking around, he sees the dinner guests "working the room", vying to be seen and acknowledged, hungry for the status, power, influence and inclusion that was culturally common at the time and which is still common in our present day society. He sees that each is keenly aware of who is present, and of their status within the group.

There is an air of calculation as each man jockey for position and seeks for himself the most advantageous of seats and connections. So caught up in their own agenda, none gives thought to who might be missing, or perhaps who should have been included.

In the Roman culture of Jesus' 1st century life, status, reputation and who you know (and what they can do for you) matters. Where one lands at the table says everything about the

host, about who matters the most, the least, and who by virtue of exclusion, doesn't matter at all. And so, Jesus tells a story, and offers some unsolicited advice.

We, living in the 21st century, have much in common with the people of Jesus' time. Our desire for belonging, to be seen and to matter is inherent to our being human. We, too, gather with others around the table for conversation and to make connections, all while sharing a meal. Our culture reinforces the message that it is often not what you do, but who you know that makes all the difference.

And so, we may find ourselves like those in Jesus' parable, intentionally inviting in only those we know or want to know better; those whose influence and connections may be of benefit to us. We know who we like, and if we're honest, we admit that we like to be with people who like and support us. It's common. It's what we do. We get comfortable within our circle, and we lose sight of those on the outside.

I remember at one of the episcopal churches I attended in Southern California a special event held twice a year called Eat, Drink and Be Merry. It was a lovely \$30, 3-course meal with wine, prepared by a local Chef with the help of a team of church volunteers, and it always sold out quickly as parishioners snapped up tickets and invited their friends to come. Although the organizers worked hard to mix up seating by using place cards, inevitably folks would either rearrange the place cards so they could sit with their friends, or more strategically, to be seated at the table of someone desirable, someone of importance.

A friend of mine, kind of like Jesus in our reading today, noticed what was happening, and it made her uncomfortable. She knew from her own life experience what it felt like to be excluded, to not have a seat at "the table", and hers had become a mission always to welcome and include the outsider. After sharing her concerns with some others, a new and different opportunity for table fellowship was created. Called "Dinner with 8 Strangers", it was designed to create an opportunity to share a meal and conversation with members one had not yet gotten to know. Yet, just the name caused some anxiety, as the thought of attending an event with people you didn't know was scary and uncomfortable. But the team persisted, and extended the invitation for all to participate as either a dinner host or an attendee. Before long, the sign up sheet was full, and the team went to work to strategically connect those who had either not yet met, or who knew one another only peripherally. Dates were set, 8'clockers were mixed with 10 o'clockers, younger members with older, long timers with newcomers.

Three days before the event, attendees were sent the host's name and address, but not the names of the other attendees. Upon arriving at the host's home, all guests were introduced and then spent the evening getting to know one another over a shared, delicious meal. Without exception, Dinner for 8 Strangers was a great success, for it was an expression of Jesus' open invitation to extend hospitality and inclusion, and shone a light on what happens when we, in humility, are willing to step back, take notice, and intentionally choose to expand the table.

Like a good friend who will tell us the truth, even when we don't want to hear it, Jesus offers us advice that, if we would take it, could transform our lives and the lives of others.

Certainly, folks are watching and scrutinizing us, taking note of how we treat our fellow human beings, whether we act to exalt others, or work to exalt ourselves. We know that Jesus calls us to act for the good of all, and that our actions matter. Theologian Meister Eckhardt suggests that what matters more is not what we do, but how we do it.

Jesus advises us to examine our intentions and the motivations that lie behind our actions, with humility. Upon self-examination, we may discover that what we do is motivated by WIFM — What's in it for me? And that awareness might help us to begin to shift our everyday situation into a sacred context — so that instead of asking, WIFM, we ask, What's in it for them?, and how can I facilitate that?

Just the change of question is enough to alter the meaning of what it is to be human, and in community. For when our actions and intentions are motivated by a desire for equity and inclusion, the only true choice we have as followers of Jesus is to step back and create space for others to step forward. There is something amazing that happens when we share what we have with others with no expectation of reciprocity — and that is called freedom. Giving without expectation, paving the way for others, stepping back in line and letting others go first — all free us up from worrying or managing what is our due or tracking our ROI. When we give for giving's sake, out of generosity and with humility, we come to know ourselves to be agents of good, of change, and of love.

Welcoming and including folks who are not like us, or who we think, perhaps, have nothing tangible to offer us, can be hard. Radical hospitality is hard, but it is what Jesus models, and it is the thing we are called to do.

So, when life is challenging, when we are worried about how to fit in, or long to belong, or are unsure of what to do, let's turn to Jesus: the advice-giver, the wisdom bearer, the one who encourages and guides us. It is through the giving of ourselves, by the grace of the Holy Spirit that we are made one: one community of love in which all are welcome and who are called always to step back, take notice, and to work together to expand God's table, so that all are welcomed and included.