

“Keeping Score”

Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Luke 14:1, 7-14: *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely...⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

The renowned American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, was not known for his modesty. He has been reported to have said: “Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose the former and have seen no reason to change.” Honest arrogance or hypocritical humility...when we hear Jesus’ parable in our text today at the dinner table with the Pharisees, it would at first seem that Jesus is suggesting a sort of “hypocritical humility.” Says Jesus, when you go to a wedding banquet, choose one of the lower seats where the less-connected, less related people sit. Then wait for the host to come and say, “Move up higher.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all at the wedding. Better to be left alone at one the lower spots than to have sat down in a more honored spot and have the host come up and say, “Would you mind moving a little lower down...there is someone more important than you who has to have this seat.” Then in the presence of everyone, you have to get up and move to a lower spot. Better to be left alone at lower spot than to be ousted from your seat!

At first hearing, one would think Jesus was giving a sort of Machiavellian strategy...a Machiavellian strategy is where one uses pretense to achieve personal gain or power. Act humble and you will be rewarded. But, as you might imagine, there is more here than that.

For Jesus continues...and by continuing he indicates there is something more than conniving slyness here. Jesus says to the host at the table: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Why do you do something for someone else? Why in order to build up your credit with them, so that you will get payback! No, says Jesus, you do something for someone else for more than just

payback...or better yet, without thought of payback. Now note the coming together of these two sayings of Jesus: the parable about being a guest at the wedding feast and the counsel to throw parties for those who cannot repay you. What is the connection? The tie is this: Our lives are not about keeping score. Seating at the wedding banquet is about scorekeeping: having honor among others. Giving a banquet is about scorekeeping...getting credit for what you do for others.

Of course, we live in world that keeps score. One of the greatest markers on the scorecard is money. A friend of mine was telling me that his son, a recent college graduate, has a job as an assistant manager of a tire store. After one year's time, his son is making \$10,000 more per year than his mother who has been teaching in the public schools for 28 years. Something seems amiss in the scorekeeping, doesn't it? Keeping score...and that's not even mentioning the outrageous compensations of CEOs that make more in one year what than that same teacher will make in her lifetime.

We keep score. Have you ever caught yourself counting the items of the person in front of you in the 10 items or less line? Do find yourself obsessed with how unfair things are for you and how favorable or lucky things are for someone else? Do you ever find yourself secretly enjoying the tragedy of others? Why else do we get all the juicy gossip about celebrities in our media sources? So we can measure the real success of their lives! We live in a scorekeeping world.

Jesus is on to our keeping score. At first glance, he seems to be giving hints on how score well...adopt a false humility until someone forces a compliment or an honor on you. However, when coupled with whom to invite to a party...the one who cannot repay you...we see Jesus is on to something deeper. Jesus is against keeping score and on to a true humility, not a pretend humility. True humility is not a strategy to gain what you want. True humility is the quality of life of those who know that their life, their worth, their being, is not measured by dollars and by recognition.

True humility means getting out of the scoring game. You may recall that Jesus' own disciples, the twelve, could not seem to get out the scoring game. According the Gospel of Luke, they were arguing about which of them were the greatest at Jesus' last meal with them in the upper room. They still were trying to figure out the scoring system...they who had spent such time with Jesus, even up to the last day, are arguing about the score.

Turning to the Gospel of John, we find a lived-out parable of Jesus in the upper room. Not just words, but an embodied teaching, a teaching action. Remember the setting: Here these scorekeeping disciples are, after a day of traveling, reclining for a Passover feast. Reclining, laying on their sides, in the pose adopted for the Passover meal. Reclining likely meant that your neighbor's feet would be close to you...dirty feet from the road. Aromatic feet! Do you recall what the Gospel of John says of Jesus here: knowing that "he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself" and he proceeds to do the work of servant, a slave: he washes their feet. Jesus kept score in different way:

For when he had finished, he took his place at table and said in effect, "I have modeled for you who I am and who you are. Here is the secret to greatness—and it is not keeping score about where one sits and about getting paid back for what you do for someone else. True greatness is to do whatever

the situation demands, even wash feet. Why? Because ego needs or self-identity have already been met by the grace of God. Jesus knew he was from God and returning to God: that's true humility.

One of my favorite preachers, a man by the name of John Claypool, tells of learning that in the American West, the typical stagecoach had six seats...each cramped seat was the same. And yet three kinds of tickets were sold: first class, second class, and third class. The difference between the tickets was not the seat but rather the entitlements that went with the ticket:

...The first class, which, of course, was the most expensive, entitled the ticket owner to remain in the stagecoach no matter what conditions might be faced. When you got the most expensive ticket, what this meant is that you were exempt from having to put forth any kind of effort. A second-class ticket meant that if difficulty arose, you had to get out and walk alongside the stagecoach until the difficulty could be resolved. The cheapest ticket-the third-class one-called on the holder to take responsibility for the difficulty. This meant they not only had to get out of the coach when there was a problem, but they also had to, alongside the driver, get down in the mud and do whatever had to be done so that the vehicle could either get through the mud or get up the hill. They were required what today we would call "sweat equity" as part of being a third-class holder of a ticket. Needless to say, this was the least prestigious of all the categories.

When I first learned of this practice on the stagecoach, I remember thinking that this is reflective of our human nature, namely, to equate the category of first class with privilege and being exempt from having to do the most menial kinds of work. And at the same time, it dawned on me how radically different Jesus' hierarchy of values were. When he came to live upon the earth, he gave a very different interpretation to this metaphor of first class. In the most literal sense, he turned the value system of the world upside down and dared to say that in God's eyes the really first-class reality was not the privilege of having everything done for you, but rather lay in a willingness to do the opposite and assume the role of a servant who is willing to deal with the difficulty and is more concerned to solve a problem than to simply be waited on by others.¹

Here is the real meaning of Jesus' parable about the seating at wedding feast: quit keeping score about where you should be entitled to seat. Practice humility: you know from whom you came and to whom you are returning. Likewise, throwing a party, doing a favor, giving a hand, when the thought is only about what you will get back in return...then you have missed out. When you know where you came from and where you are going, you pick up a towel and wash feet.

Here's one of those ironies of life: the more we try to achieve first-class, the more we grasp at first class, the more work whatever means to get to be first class...the more desperate our lives will be. What is first class in the eyes of God? The person who knows from where he or she comes...the person who knows where they are going. And once that gracious truth takes hold deep in your being, you can begin act out what is truly first class in God's eyes.

The root of the word humility and human are the same...the same as the word "humus." All come

¹ <http://www.day1.net/?view=transcripts&tid=1>

from that root word meaning earth...dirt...soil. Humility is being human. As Augustine, one of the great theologians of the church put it: the human dilemma is we forget that we are human. We either think of ourselves more highly than human—that's pride. Or, we lower ourselves, and act less than human or inhumane. Sometime we even say someone is acting like an "animal," but I have always felt that was an insult to animals! The human dilemma is that we forget we are human—raising ourselves up or throwing ourselves away.

The witness of the New Testament is that true humanity is seen in our Lord Jesus Christ. He defines what it means to be human, to be humane, and to live that true humility. So what is said of Jesus can be said of us: knowing that we come from God and that we are returning to God, what other score keeping does there need to be? Take up the towel and find greatness in service.