

A Place at the Table
Sermon 181 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 23, 2023
Luke 14:1-14

I heard a story once about a young man who was hoping to walk onto Baylor's baseball team. He wanted it so badly that he hired a hitting coach to help him with his swing. He met with the coach for several sessions, trying his best to remain patient, trusting that the coach knew what he was doing, and trying not to question his methods. But after a while, the player got frustrated with the coach and the pace of training he was getting. He got so frustrated that he was ready to quit!

In a heated moment during one of his training sessions, he looked at the coach and said, "I just don't think this is working out. I hired you to help me with hitting and we have been at this for weeks and you haven't even let me hold a bat yet! You just keep fussing over how I walk up and how I stand at the plate. You insist on all these leg exercises and stretches, and all this secondary stuff... I hired you to help me with hitting and you won't even let me hold a bat!"

The wise coach cracked a slight smile as he looked with ease at the anxious player before he replied: "Son if you even want a chance to swing for the rafters at Baylor's field, you're going to have to build a new and stronger foundation. Let me know when you're ready to get back to work."

Sometimes we all need a little help from a loving coach who sees things differently - perhaps even more fully - than we do.

(Reminds me of a verse from 1 Corinthians 13: Now we see only in part... then - meaning one day we will see in full)

The reading from Luke's Gospel today brings us into the home of a Pharisee where Jesus is at the table - not with his disciples - but with a group of, well, Pharisees. Just as they are reclining for the Sabbath meal a man with dropsy enters the scene.

Because we have read the Gospels before and we know that Jesus likes to heal people - no matter the day of the week. And because we know that Jesus can sometimes get a little heated with the Pharisees over issues of law and piety, we might think we know where this whole thing is headed.

But this story is different. So let's set our assumptions aside for, I don't know, the next 10 minutes or so. Let's imagine, just for a few minutes, Jesus as a loving coach, making observations and then offering a humble suggestion.

So here we are in the home of a Pharisee, full of other Pharisees (presumably the guy's friends) gathering at the table for a Sabbath meal when a man with dropsy enters. There are at least two ways to interpret this malady, according to New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine because, in the ancient world, dropsy was used to describe a medical condition

that we now call edema (swelling) but it was also used as a colloquial way of talking about someone who was greedy. So, either the man with dropsy was physically ill or spiritually ill. (Again, to address our assumptions or what we think might happen...) Dropsy was not something that would render a person ritually impure, nor would his presence cause a problem of purity for those gathered around the table. The problem with his presence seems to be that he was in need of healing - either physically or spiritually - or both. And, his healing was needed on the Sabbath.

So Jesus looks at his dinner companions and asks the question: What do you think? Is it lawful to heal this guy or not? The Pharisees were silent. So Jesus pushed a little more by offering an anecdote that many of them would have known: The rabbis teach that if an ox falls into a well on the Sabbath, you shouldn't pull it out, but wait until the following day in order to keep the commandment - to keep the Sabbath holy. But Jesus ups the ante a little bit and adds a twist to the rabbis' teaching saying: If any of you has a child or an ox who falls into a well on the Sabbath, will you not immediately pull it out?

When he invokes the riddle in this way the crowd is forced to deal with the bigger question here: Is the man who needs healing more like an animal or like my own child?

Like a good baseball coach who sees the stance as a critical foundation to the swing and ultimately the hit, Jesus sees the limitations of what his table-mates are able to comprehend and he challenges them to rethink how they have been trained to see this uninvited dinner guest. Is he an animal or a human being? Should we treat him more like property or like kinfolk?

The Pharisees remained silent.

So Jesus presumably backed off a bit, and let the issue rest while the dinner party went on. When the time came to gather around the table, Jesus watched as the guests choose their places at the table. Remember this is not like our tables where we say that every chair is up for grabs and it doesn't really matter who sits where, in the ancient world the table was reflective of one's place in society.

The most honored guest (aka the person with the most clout, power, wealth, and authority) would usually sit next to the host and everyone else would file into place according to who they were and where they fit in the social hierarchy. So Jesus watched the ways the guests chose for themselves the places of honor around the table. Then, Jesus spoke up with a story - a parable.

When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, don't choose for yourself a place of honor, but sit at the lowest place so that when the host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher." ... Then Jesus continued... When you give a luncheon, do not invite those who are your equals (your relatives or your rich neighbors), but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (those who are not like you). And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

This is of course, the truncated version. But you can see what Jesus is doing here. He actually says it very clearly as he transitions away from the parable toward more direct teaching and instruction. The point Jesus is trying to make is this: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Like a wise and loving coach Jesus sees the foundational issue is the self-focus.

Should we heal the man or would that make us in violation of the law? Where should we sit? Where is my place at the table?

Jesus can see that the focus is all in the wrong place. The dinner guests are so preoccupied with themselves and their place in the world that they cannot fully see the human beings right in front of their eyes.

And what I love so much about this story is that unlike so many others where Jesus is frustrated with the Pharisees, the landowners, the lawyers, the tax collectors... the people of means who never seem to get it. Unlike the interactions between them and Jesus when Jesus gets upset or frustrated, here Jesus seems to have more patience, more kindness, dare I even say more humility as he urges his dinner companions to expand their views.

Jesus is modeling what he is teaching.

Sometimes I worry that as followers of Jesus, we consider humility to be sort of a minor virtue. A sort of small print requirement that comes after the bigger, bolder, more important pieces of our theology. Sometimes I worry that we treat it like an add-on to consider after we have worked out the rest of our salvation or relationship with God.

But if this is true, let us remember that after Jesus observes the Pharisees - presumably Pharisees he was friends with... (We at least know that he saw fit to dine with them on the sabbath) - this is what he saw as most important for their faith, for their lives, and for their experience of resurrection: humility. For if you do all these things (he says after instructing them to choose a lower place for themselves at the table and to invite the marginalized, the poor, the forgotten, the low... to their own tables) you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Jesus, the good coach, sees that humility is the essential foundation upon which a life of faith is built.

And this is most difficult for us because everything in our lives seeks to say otherwise. We are trained to be proud, confident and sure. The virtues of ability, achievement, success, and popularity are the ones that reap the obvious rewards. So if we want to be successful at Christianity, if we want to achieve a good relationship with God, then shouldn't we concern ourselves with advancement? Getting the doctrines right, following all the rules, befriending the pious, the godly, the ones who know all the Bible verses and seem to also know how to apply them to their lives with ease and clarity?

Well, maybe there is a place for those things, but Jesus seems to be coaching us to start with the approach and the stance. We start with humility.

This is a lesson I learn over and over again from Marc and Kim Wyatt. CBF Field Personnel who have created the Welcome House Network which provides housing and community for refugees. During this three-week focus on Global Mission, we will see other examples and hear stories of other field personnel just like Marc and Kim who work in the United States and around the world and their stories remind us that we may think we have everything to offer the world - but when we draw nearer still to those around the globe whom God already loves... and with whom God is already present... We quickly discover how much we have to learn.

But we have to be humble enough to know that our experience enables us only to see a small part of God's revelation and God's activity in this world. We need one another to get a fuller picture. And we will never expand our views, our faith, or our love if we do not start with humility.

So often we learn this through the stories of field personnel or as we ourselves participate in different missions and ministries of service. But I believe that this lesson offers profound wisdom for our regular lives... Just imagine what would happen if we could remember humility in our everyday living as well....! Imagine a world filled with humble Christians!

We live in a world with so much pain and division. There are more voices, perspectives, parties, and influencers out there than ever before and each one wants our full allegiance - not because it is good for us or good for our neighbors, but because it is good for them.

I am afraid to say that too often good, well-meaning, Christian folks like you and I get distracted and swayed by these voices - most often because we are afraid of something and they are offering us a scapegoat or a quick solution to calm our fears.

Like the Pharisees looking for assurance in the places of honor at the table, we look to these ideologies, these lesser identities, these pathways to success and security for ourselves and they feel so nice. But when we buy into these ready-made, absolute ideologies about us and them, we are really just assuming positions of pride and arrogance, believing that we can see the whole picture that we know better than everybody else and that we have figured it out.

We close our minds to the possibility that God might be working through each interruption in our lives and in our faith - like the man with dropsy who interrupted the sabbath meal in search of healing.

We close our minds and harden our hearts, perhaps because it is too painful to open them back up again, once we admit that maybe we don't have all the answers...

But if that continues to be our approach and our stance, we will continue to be like that young baseball player, growing frustrated with the coach - and we will never hit a grand

slam, heck, we might never even get to pick up that bat. Because the good coach teaches that we cannot play the games of life and faith unless we first work on our approach and a stance: Seeking first, foremost, and always: a posture of humility.

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May God's presence always be alive within you
Giving you the grace never to sell yourself short
Grace to risk something big for something good
And grace to remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth.
And too small for anything but love.

So may God take your feet and walk with them
May God take your hands and heal through them
And may God take your hearts, and set them on fire.

Amen.