

“Open Hands”

Introduction: I would imagine that almost every host and/or hostess knows the fear: You have planned long and hard for your dinner party. You’ve pondered the guest list and tried to get the right mix of people. You’ve carefully thought about what you’re going to serve. You’ve come up with a few “ice-breaker” questions that you can ask if conversation is slow in getting started. But then there’s still that one person who you’re just not sure about, who has the potential to be quite difficult. How will they fit in? Will they talk too much? Will they bring up controversial topics, or seek to argue about politics? Will they insist on hanging around when everyone else has gone home and you are trying to clean up and go to bed?! We’ve probably all had, and hopefully survived, these kinds of guests. But would we imagine that such a difficult guest could be Jesus?

Jesus, we’ve pointed out in the past, spent a lot of time in his ministry around a table, talking with people and teaching them about the kingdom of God as they shared a meal together. But, as we see in this morning’s reading, he wasn’t always easy to have in your home! At this particular table, in the home of a prominent religious leader, Jesus decides to play “get the guests.” After he has finished with them, he goes on to play a round of “hammer the host.” Neither are what we would call good table manners. One writer offers that after this evening, Jesus’ dinner invitations probably got scarce, at least among the religious elite. But Jesus wasn’t concerned about manners, or even future invitations. Jesus brought with him to this meal the topsy-turvy standards of the kingdom of God, and he was concerned about the self-seeking attitude of both guests and host at this table, an attitude that sought to measure their value and worth in all the wrong ways and places.

How do we measure our value and worth? How does this affect the way we might relate to others?

I. Place Cards and Guest Lists

A. Our text begins with the information that as he came into the house of this particular Pharisee, Jesus was being carefully watched. Jesus had been challenging the accepted, traditional ways of relating to God; what might he be up to now? But Jesus was also carefully watching those who were watching him. In particular, he was watching how the various guests chose their places at the table, all of them seeking “places of honor.” Helpful for us to know is that where you sat at a meal in that day was huge. It was huge because it revealed your social status; it was a public advertisement of where you stood in the hierarchy of life. The closer you sat to the host, the higher your status, the more honor that accrued to you.

Illustration: We have some sense of that. At our own wedding receptions, you typically come into the hall and look for your name, and then for the table number that is next to or above your name. The lower the number the closer you are to the head table. Usually that indicates that your relationship to the bride and groom is much more intimate than if you find yourself sitting in the back of the room, next to the groom’s uncle’s best friend who is hard of hearing and just wants to talk about himself all night! But when you’re near the head table, you get served earlier, have a better view of the toasts and speeches, and for a few hours, at least, enjoy a sense of feeling just a wee bit superior, do you not?!

B. How is it that we measure our value in life? Maybe we recall what it was like to get picked last for the team in gym class, or to have finished toward the bottom in a race. Maybe we remember what it

was like to have flunked an exam, or to have lost out in a competition for a promotion. We know what it's like to feel unwanted or less than. Conversely, maybe we were highly successful on our team, or in our class, or at our workplace, and we know the pressure of trying to hold on to that position. Either way, the danger is that we become trapped in a value system, in a hierarchy of identity, that says our value in life is determined by where we land on some particular scale and how we thus become viewed by others. Such a value system, Jesus goes on to suggest in a parable, carries with it a high price. Image management is exhausting. It can cause us to live with the anxiety that we will be found as "less than," and that, like the host does in the parable, we'll get bounced from the position we've worked so hard to obtain. Our coach will put us back on JV, our teacher will send us to the remedial class, our boss will return us to our old desk, or maybe send us packing altogether. And then what will others think of us? In the eyes of the world, we'll be worth nothing.

C. Now the guests, and their jockeying for position, were not the only ones Jesus had his eye on. Jesus next turned his attention to the host, though he was clearly still addressing everyone in the room because everyone there would need to be a host at one time or another and have to put a guest list together. That is because an ethic of reciprocity ruled the day. To accept an invitation meant that eventually you would have to extend one. Therefore, as a host, you would be careful to invite only those who could pay you back, and also to invite those on a higher social scale, anticipating that their return invitation would lift you up a rung or two on the social ladder.

D. The danger with this kind of "social bookkeeping" is that you only give when you know you can get. Why bother with those who can do nothing for us? This kind of thinking leaks over into our relationship with God as well. We can end up doing "religious things," doing good things for God, with the belief that God will somehow pay us back and return the favor by doing good things for us. But if something difficult, or even tragic, happens in our life, we conclude that God has somehow failed us and has not given us what we deserve.

II. Seeing Ourselves Clearly

A. In the midst of all this stumbling around that we can do as human beings, seeking our value in all the wrong places, where does the gospel meet us? It meets us when we're able to see ourselves clearly. To begin with, we notice that Jesus was at table on a sabbath. While sabbath was the day set aside for worship and rest, Deuteronomy 5 reminds its readers, in the fourth commandment, that sabbath was also a day for Israel to remember the sting of slavery that she had experienced: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (5:15). They were once a people relegated to the lowest position in society and God rescued them. They went from unwanted to wanted, from ignored to remembered, from foreigner to full citizen, from worthless to valued, not because of anything they had done but because of the steadfast love of the Lord, because of who God is and what God had done for them. It should have humbled them, had they taken the time to remember and to see themselves clearly. Instead, they were scrambling to exalt themselves, seeking to establish their value on their own terms.

B. Such a rescue from slavery becomes deepened as we consider the work of Jesus. In a few minutes, we'll remember how, at the table where he celebrated the last supper he would eat with his disciples before his death, Jesus explained to his disciples how he was going to forgive them and restore them and renew them, and all who would follow in their faith. What we see is that Jesus came into this world, into the wedding reception of life, and willingly humbled himself, taking the form of a servant

who took the last and worst seat in the room and gave up his life for us, not because of anything we did, but purely out of his love for us. Because he did this, we do not have to fight and scratch to grab honor for and to exalt ourselves, nor do we have to feel like we've been abandoned or forsaken, sitting alone in last place. Rather, Jesus has exalted us, Jesus will exalt us, and right now is sitting with us. Our value and worth and well-being simply but profoundly come from his delight in us, not because we've deserved it in any way.

Reflecting on her experience of communion in this light, author Rachel Held Evans acknowledges that on any given Sunday morning, she might spot six or seven people who have wronged her or hurt her, people whose politics, theology, or personalities drive her crazy in some way. As she puts it, "The church is positively crawling with people who don't deserve to be here . . . starting with me." [*Searching for Sunday*, 152]

If we can so humbly and clearly see our need, and what God has done for us, such good news then frees us to have the same humble attitude, to let go of our image management and self-promotion, and to reach out to and care for the other: the outcasts, the oddballs, those who are different from us, those who we may not even like, and all those we're worried won't give us anything in return. We can do this because in Jesus we have been given all that we really need.

C. So, in this achievement-oriented, pride-filled culture in which we live, let me offer a practice for you to try as you come to the table of the Lord and receive what he has for you there. Come to the plate filled with the bread of life with open hands. Come, not to reach out and take the bread; come with your hands open to receive the bread, which our deacon will then place there, with the words, "The body of Christ broken for you." It is a vulnerable posture, these open hands. It leaves you somewhat exposed and out of control. But it is also an expectant posture, a posture that waits to receive, a posture that reminds us deep down that we don't have all the answers, that we don't have all the power, that our value and worth come from the God who has given himself to us.

It's the kind of open-handed humility which, if we bring to the table of the Lord as well as the tables of our lives, will change everything about how we experience God, and relate to one another.