

Sermon Friend, move up to a better place
01.09.19 Luke 14:1, 7-14 Julian Templeton

Imagine the following scenario: you are invited to a wedding reception and arrive late. You discover there is no seating plan for the wedding banquet. When you survey the reception room you see that most of the guests are already seated and there are only two available seats; one is right at the back of the reception room beside the kitchen door; the other is at the top table beside the bride. This creates a conundrum: you would normally take the seat at the back; except you have forgotten to bring your hearing aids with you, and from the seat at the back you are likely not to hear any of the speeches. So you decide that despite not being in the bridal party or being close family, you will take the remaining seat at the top table alongside the bride. Everyone is seated, the meal is about to begin, but then the MC comes over to you and informs you that the seat you are sitting in is reserved for the late-arriving grandmother of the bride. Imagine the embarrassment you would feel when you are ejected from your seat and given a seat at the very back of the reception room, next to the kitchen door! To add insult to injury, the kitchen door bumps the back of your chair whenever the serving staff bustle in and out, you get the odours and the noise from the kitchen whenever the door is opened, and exactly as you predicted, you can't hear a word of the speeches!

Now, let's rewind that same scenario, and make one change to it: you are invited to the same wedding reception with no seating plan; you arrive late, discover that there are only two available seats and decide, despite forgetting your hearing-aids, that you will take a seat at the very back of the reception room, next to the kitchen door, with all of the irritations I previously described. But having taken this seat, the MC comes

up to you and says: '*Friend, move up to a better place*', and informs you that the bride and groom have invited you come and sit at the top table next to them. Imagine how honoured you would feel, and, you are then able to hear every word of the speeches!

Describe Ripeka and Eddie's Wedding and Reception. No sit-down meal; instead canapés were served as we stood and chatted, which meant that the anxiety about who sits next to whom during the meal was avoided! The only seated part of the evening was when chairs were laid out in long rows for the speeches. I had been asked to give one of the speeches and managed to embarrass myself by confusing the name of the Groom with the Best Man! I decided that the best way to react to my silly mistake was to laugh along with everyone else.

Embarrassment and honour perform pivotal functions in the story that Jesus tells about the consequences of where one chooses to sit at a wedding banquet.

Jesus is invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of a leading Pharisee. He notices that the guests compete to secure the places of honour nearest to the host. So he says: 'When you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't sit down in the place of honour in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited and the host asks you to vacate your seat for that person, necessitating your taking the least important seat and you feeling embarrassed.' (14:7-9) Those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Today, arguably, an inflated sense of entitlement is a very great problem in families and in society. It is the tendency to imagine that one ought receive preferential treatment because one

deserves it. The problem with claiming preferential treatment is that there is only so much of it to go round, and there are always others who are as deserving, or more deserving, than you.

But there is another way, the way that Jesus advocates. He says that when you are invited to a wedding banquet take the least important place. And then, when the host sees you, he may say, '*Friend, move up to a better place.*' And then all who sit at table with you will honour you. (14:10-11) Those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The challenge in always assuming that one ought to be allocated the best place, or have the top job, or be in a position to buy the best-quality product, is how you maintaining your pre-eminent position at the top of the tree. The reality is that such a position is always precarious, and even autocratic dictators find, eventually, that someone else comes along and knocks them off their perch. Take the top spot and there's only one direction left to take, and that is down. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Or, as Mary puts it in her song, the magnificat: 'The Lord has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.' And Mary's song tells us that there is one alone who is pre-eminent and supreme, and that is the Lord God Almighty. When we realise that we live and move and have our being by the grace of Almighty God it gradually begins to dawn on us that the most appropriate, indeed the only appropriate, attitude to adopt in life is God's attitude. And God's attitude, as we see it displayed in the life of Jesus, is one of greatness exercised in service, and glory demonstrated in humility, and gracious generosity. God, as Creator and Provider, gives generously to all without expecting repayment, which leads us

into the next story that Jesus tells about what kind of people we are to invite when we host a meal.

Jesus instructs: 'When you host a lunch or dinner, do not invite you friends, family, relatives or neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and then you would be repaid. Rather, when you host a meal, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' (14:12-14)

This is surely the most counter-intuitive hospitality advice we are ever likely to get. Those of us who are in a position to invite others for meals will probably admit that we tend to invite friends, family, relatives and neighbours. And, if we have done so, we may have also received reciprocal invitations to dine with them. Why, we might ask, does Jesus specifically instruct that we instead invite a completely different group of people: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? The answer is: because the latter people will not be in a position to repay you by inviting you for a meal. In other words: when you offer hospitality to those who are in no position to offer reciprocal hospitality, you do so as a true gift, a gracious gift, with no expectation of repayment. Why might this curious advice be good news? It is good news because when we give without expecting repayment, we are liberated from the tiresome business of *scorekeeping* (Capon, *The Parables of Grace*).

By *scorekeeping* I mean keeping a mental note of those people we have helped and from whom we expect help in return. It is a very human kind of calculation that probably arises from that sense of fairness that begins when we are young children. It is the calculation that reasons: if I do something for you; you

ought to do something similar for me. This kind of reciprocity is common, and often works well. But what Jesus is getting at is that *quid pro quo* is a kind of transaction; it is not a true gift. Moreover, this transactional exchange breaks down when you do something for someone but that person does not do anything for you. Then a kind of debit ledger raises its ugly head, and one can begin to become resentful. The resentment arises because one expects repayment in kind, but no such repayment is forthcoming.

But in this second story that Jesus tells I sense that Jesus is in effect saying what he also says in the first story, he is saying to each of us: '*Friend, move up to a better place.*' That is, Jesus invites us to move to a place in our thinking and feeling where we begin to take on something of God's perspective. As I mentioned earlier, God's attitude, as we see it displayed in the life of Jesus, is one of greatness exercised in service, and glory demonstrated in humility, and gracious generosity. God, as Creator and Provider, gives generously to all, without expecting repayment. And if God's nature is that of grace, then we may be so bold as to make the claim that *God is not in the business of scorekeeping*. That would be a bold claim to make in view of the belief that God, as Creator and Provider, is also Judge. If God is Judge, then on what basis might God judge? Taking the Apostle Paul's witness as our guide we can affirm that God judges on the basis *grace alone*, not on the basis of the works that we have done or failed to do. That is, God offers us his grace in the person of Jesus Christ, and by faith we embrace that gracious gift (Calvin). Judgment is a matter of whether we accept that gift and live by grace alone; or whether we reject that gift and live instead by scorekeeping, by a tiresome ledger of debits and credits.

Christians who worship regularly are reminded regularly in the words of the Lord's Prayer 'Forgive us our sins, or debts, as we forgive those who sin against us, or our debtors.' In this second story, Jesus is effectively saying that the whole ledger sheet has been *abolished*, and it is not only our debts and debtors that we need to forgive but also our *credits and creditors*. Jesus says to each of us '*Friend, move up to a better place*' where the gifts you give are true gifts without expectation of repayment in kind. As training for this kind of giving, Jesus says: Come, sit at my table and receive the gifts of bread and wine, the gifts of my body and lifeblood sacrificed for you; the purest gift of grace for which there can be no repayment.

Thanks be to God.