

From Humility to Exaltation

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Emilie Townes, the dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, tells the story of her grandmother: "Chile, I just want to be a blessing. That's all I want for my life, is to be a blessing to others." She remembers her grandmother saying this many times as Emilie was growing up. In her first memory of hearing it, like many of us, around the age of three, she did not have a clue what she meant or what a blessing was. She could tell that it was a good thing and a Christian thing, but beyond that she was caught in a childhood mystery of faith. As she grew older, the notion of blessing began to take on helpful meanings and became understandable. Blessing was something that Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit did on a regular basis to good little girls and boys. We had to mind our elders, work hard in school, share our toys, and learn to pray really hard for our families, for others, and for ourselves. If we did all these things, then we would receive whatever we asked for—this was blessing.

However, this worked only for a time, because life became more complicated, and she learned in Sunday school one morning that sometimes the answer from God was a "No" rather than a "Yes." This, too, made sense over time, because she could, on occasion, ask for more than was realistic or reasonable—like a pony when they lived in urban areas or that the president (who she thought was all powerful, but not to be confused with God) could simply declare an end to racist, or sexist, or classist behaviors and thereby settle the race problem or pay inequality or issues of class in the United States.

Blessing became more complex, more elusive, and more special; as she grew into young adulthood, she became aware of the high demand her grandmother had

placing on her life and witness. Being a blessing was not easy, but trying to jump-start it by scurrying into spaces and places we think will shower us with blessings or display the blessings we have received or perceive we have received is much easier. In all these cases, the deep meaning of blessing is lost in our scripture, as Jesus was doing more than giving a biblical-world Miss Manners lesson. He was highlighting the ways in which the realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order; trying to presume a place of honor in that order is unwise and perhaps even unfaithful.

As helpful background, this passage relies on some knowledge of Palestinian wedding feasts, in which the male guests recline on couches, with the center couch being the place of honor, its inhabitants chosen according to wealth, power, or office. If a more prominent man arrives late, as was often the case, someone of lesser rank was asked to move to a less prestigious location. Jesus was offering sound practical advice to choose the lowest place so that you can be invited up, but he was also pointing to something deeper and richer.

The realm of God is also about how God offers an invitation in our lives to receive a genuine blessing when we learn that it is unfaithful to store up spiritual brownie points to show off our goodness so other can notice and then make it worse by showy displays of that goodness. Receiving a blessing that invites us to grow into a deeper relationship with God is not something we can work our way into through acts designed to display our worth. No. God asks us to live into our giftedness and righteousness through our everyday acts toward each other and in and through our relationship with God and creation. Jesus wants us to understand that our all-too-human drive to seek the best seat in the house or at the party does not and will not mark our genuine participation in God's mercy or love.

Jesus was not done, however, for he had words of wisdom, warning, and blessing for the host who may have fallen victim to a bout of thinking himself

exalted by inviting those who could return his invitation was a sign of his faithful witness. This is like arranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship—nothing is gained and wasting time. Jesus was clear who should be invited: people who are the very fabric of God's realm—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. For Jesus, extending genuine hospitality to the least of these through acts of unselfish hospitality and kindness can wash God's blessing over us and give us a sense of the great blessing that is to come in the resurrection.

Being a blessing is challenging and grace-filled. Emilie's grandmother was pointing to the power of righteousness in the Christian journey. Righteousness and right living encourages us to live our lives with honesty as we seek justice and sound moral principles and behaviors in our communities and with our neighbors. Her grandmother understood well the importance of living with hospitality and generosity as a witness to God's saving acts in history. Being a blessing, living righteousness in our daily lives, draws us into relationship with those who have less than we do, yet are the true representatives of God's countless blessings in our lives and in the lives of others. **Emilie M. Townes**

The Lord calls the community of God's people to bear witness to the fellowship between God and humanity by establishing fellowship between human beings. Karl Barth, considered one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the twentieth century explained:

1. as the faith community reaches out to all nations, we offer unity among peoples that overcomes national, ethnic, and linguistic barriers in our world;
2. in our attitude toward racial differences, the church refuses to accept either the legitimacy or necessity of dividing up the community into "special white, black and brown congregations";

3. responding to the plurality of human cultures, the ministry of the people of God brings different people together to overcome cultural differences, rather than to sanctify or bless cultural differences; and
4. in its pastoral work the Christian community sets aside class distinctions in society between rich and poor.

Barth said the community of God's people, the church, "would be mortally sick if it were to identify itself with a class, or its concerns with the interests, its faith with the ideology, or its ethos with the morality of such a class." Barth's pastoral theology offered us the Christian practices of hospitality and welcome to heal national, ethnic, racial, cultural, and class divisions in the world. In the reflections of this great theologian, hospitality and fellowship became central to the church's ministry.

Luke gives beautiful testimony to this barrier-breaking hospitality in the account of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth and laid Jesus in a manger "because there was no place for them in the inn" ([2:1-7](#)). The birth of Jesus breached the blockade of welcome for the babe at the inn and embodied royal David's line in an unexpected way. The hospitality of the manger reminds us of the welcome of the stranger and the communion at table that breaks down the barriers at the borders to human community and overcomes the constrictive exclusions of fear and loathing in the world. **Charles E. Raynal**

Too often we want exaltation without humility. We want the best, but are not willing to give others the same. Jesus said if we will exalt ourselves we will be humbled, but if we humble ourselves we will be exalted. Don't we so quickly tell your virtues, if they are there they will be found out!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C,
Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).