

October 2, 2022

The Ways of Jesus: A Place for Everyone

The Great Banquet

World Communion Sunday

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“Dishonor on you! Dishonor on your cow!” This quote from the Disney movie *Mulan* struck a chord with junior high youth when the movie came out in theaters, to the point I will have to say, that it got overused. If someone took the last cupcake at dinner, someone would inevitably proclaim, “Dishonor on you! Dishonor on your cow!” The youth at the church I served, used the threat of dishonor as a joke because unless we are talking about military service or high academic achievement, we don’t talk much about honor any more. But in the ancient world, honor was a big deal. In ancient China, the setting for *Mulan*, bringing honor to the family, which even included family ancestors was important.

The way in which a woman brought honor to her family was by marrying well. The problem for *Mulan* that she was a young woman who struggled to make a good impression on the village matchmaker, and because of that, the likelihood of her marrying well was slim. As the story unfolded, though, viewers saw *Mulan* bring honor to her family through strength, courage, and doing the right thing, although her ways were very unconventional. All the children, teens, and adults who have ever watched it have been reminded that people of all genders can be honorable, regardless of their gender identity or expression.

Honor was a big deal in the first century Mediterranean world in which Jesus lived as well. The primary responsibility of the head of the household was to protect the honor of the family. This played out in several ways in that society, including making sure the women in the family married well. Honor also extended to the ways in which men conducted business with one another and even in social settings. Honor features in today’s text from the Gospel of Luke.

This scene is in the same section of the Gospel of Luke as some of the other stories we’ve looked at in this series, the travel narrative in which Jesus makes his way from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south. As he travels, he tells stories in response to questions, accusations, and his own experiences.

As the scene begins, Jesus was going to Sabbath dinner at the home of one of the one of the religious leaders, a Pharisee. In the interest of guarding against anti-Semitism, let's remember, that the disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees were disagreements between people from the same faith tradition, both interpreting what they believed to be true about God, human beings, and their sacred texts. Pharisees were not out to get Jesus personally; they were trying to protect their tradition.

In the story, folks were returning from worship, but if the purpose of worship was to align their hearts and minds with the Holy, it didn't take. Instead of celebrating their common faith as they headed home for dinner, people were eyeing Jesus suspiciously, so it was a little tense. As they walked to dinner, Jesus encountered a man with severe edema. Because he believed there was never a bad time to ease suffering, Jesus healed the man even though it was the Sabbath. This certainly would have raised eyebrows.

When he arrived at the dinner, he noticed that the dinner guests were racing each other to get to the best seats, the ones closest to the host. Think of it like a wedding reception without assigned seats. The doors to the reception hall are opened and all the guests come racing in to try to get the seats near the bride and groom. That's not how it works. The way it works is the people who are most important to the couple sit near them at dinner, the wedding party, parents, and grandparents. They are given the places of honor.

In the story, Jesus responded to this flurry of activity by telling them a story meant to teach them something like don't inflate your own importance. It is better to assume your seat is in the back 40 and be told to move up, bringing honor to you, than to seat yourself close to the bride and groom and be told your place was "way back there" causing you shame. This part of the author's story was probably not a story that originated with Jesus, but certainly the idea of the proud being humbled and the humble being exalted was well entrenched in the Jewish wisdom tradition and Jesus' teachings. In fact, Proverbs 25:6-7 sums it up well, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

After this lesson for the guests, Jesus turned his attention to the host, the Pharisee. This is where the author inserts a story that scholars believe could have actually originated with Jesus. And to me, it has Jesus written all over it.

This is Luke 14: 12-24.

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 and sisters 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.”

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ ¹⁹ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ ²⁰ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ ²² And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ ²³ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

This story doesn't surprise us. We know enough about Jesus to know what he thought about inclusion and belonging. He was a y'all come, everyone is welcome, kind of guy. However, we can imagine that the people hearing this story, the people who knew banquets were a great time to increase your social capital and bring yourself honor, were a little uncomfortable to hear Jesus' criticism of the host's guest list.

Imagine that wedding reception again. Everyone finally takes their seats and Uncle Herbert takes the microphone from the DJ and says to the bride and groom, “These are not the people you should have invited here. Look at them in their

expensive clothes. Look at the gift table, piled high with their gifts and their checks. Outside these doors, there are people sleeping in doorways, hungry, addicted, alienated from their families, without an address where they could even receive a wedding invitation. Those are the people who should have been invited. Not these people who you vacation with, who will decide on your next promotion, or who you expect to invite you to their next party. Invite the people who have nothing with which to repay you.

Jesus tells us that it is when those dear ones have been invited, when they have taken their seats...it is then that we will see clearly what the kin-dom of God is like. True honor does not come from acquiring the most well-connected friends, but from including the ones who have been kept on the outside. As people who profess to follow the ways of Jesus, we cannot allow this foundational message to be forgotten, or worse, twisted, to make people think that if only they believed this, had more money, or if only they would do or say that, if only their family looked like mine, if only their skin, hair, or culture was a little less colorful, they would be welcome. Jesus' message is pretty clear. There is a place for everyone and especially for the ones who haven't ever found a place.

World Communion Sunday is a grand celebration of that. Christians all over the world, who express their faith in all kinds of ways, are participating in communion and proclaiming unity with one another, which in itself is a big deal. And I think, that must make God smile, especially now, when it feels like we are much better at finding reasons to divide ourselves than we are at bringing people together.

The rise of Christian Nationalism in the United States is one way this is playing out. Christian Nationalism is an anti-democratic ideology that merges a narrow definition of American identity with an ultra-conservative strain of Christianity. The people who embrace this ideology, whether they claim the term or not, believe that the United States was founded on Christian principles and that Christianity should be privileged over other religions and belief systems. Christian Nationalism claims the U.S. was established as a Christian nation and that God has chosen the U.S. over other nations; that Christianity should be privileged in both law and the political realm over other belief systems – specifically, Christian Nationalists believe that power belongs in the hands of people who are conservative Christians, but also white, natural-born citizens.

The rise of Christian Nationalism has not happened over night. In her book, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, Carter Heyward traces Christian Nationalism in the U.S. to the 1950s. She writes, "The movement is rooted in the resumption that certain Christians---in the United States, especially over the last seventy-five years, white conservative evangelicals are spiritually obligated to use their powers of persuasion, and coercion, if necessary, to shape and eventually lead the government of the United States in all three of its branches---executive, legislative, and judicial." This narrow view of what Christianity is and what being an American is, is meant to exclude other faith traditions and even some Christians who they deem not righteous enough. It is not democratic. It is authoritarian, patriarchal, homophobic, xenophobic, and racist. It privileges the people who have always been invited to the banquet and marginalizes and oppresses everyone else. It is damaging this nation, poisoning Christianity, and pitting neighbor against neighbor. And we really must stand against it.

In her book, Hayward spells out what she says are the seven deadly sins of white Christian Nationalism. In the last section of the book, she writes, "Faced with devastating consequences of the seven deadly sins, we must consider calls to study, to act, calls to resist these sins and to join in healing our churches and liberating our nation." She recognizes that it is going to take years, even generations, to make significant headway, but that we must try because we owe it to the ones who will inherit our communities, our nation, and this world. She writes, "In the spirit of our ancestors (at their best), we must keep the faith (at its best). Our actions in this moment, have the opportunity to bring honor, not just to our families, but to our faith and to a God who cares deeply about the way we treat one another.

Today is a day in which we celebrate unity with our siblings in faith. We celebrate the vision Jesus cast of a table where everyone is welcome and where the ones who have been excluded are purposely included and helped to find a place to belong. We celebrate our common stories, and, once again, we cannot allow them to be twisted and used to separate us from our neighbors, both right next door and across the world. The message of Jesus was for everyone. It was a message of love and justice and compassion. And people who pervert that message into one that says some people are chosen by God and others are not, do not know the God we serve and have horribly and dangerously misunderstood Jesus' words.

Friends, we are called to make this table a place of welcome, now more than ever. And we are called to extend it into the world until there is a place for everyone who seeks to love and be loved. My hope for us is that this World Communion Sunday will encourage us to recommit ourselves to the work of creating safe spaces, pulling up chairs, and inviting our neighbors to sit down, have a meal, and rest for a while. We are always better together. Amen.