

Hebrew Testament: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Proverbs 25:6-7

Gospel: Luke 14:1, 7-14

word count 1,543

At the beginning of his first semester at the prestigious Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a new student who was rather full of himself over the distinction granted him of being chosen to study there, arrived outside his new dormitory in a taxi. Standing nearby as he arrived was a white-haired man in shirtsleeves who appeared to be waiting for incoming students. As the young man was indeed an incoming student, he asked rather condescendingly, “Hey, mister—do you work here?”

The older man indicated that he did, and so the new arrival commanded, “Then you may take my bags up to room 309.” Although it was rather difficult in the heat of a late New York City summer, the elder man silently picked up two heavy suitcases and trudged up the three flights of stairs to the door of 309. The young student followed, holding only his raincoat and a light briefcase. When the door was opened, the new student casually flipped the person who had carried the baggage a small coin. The man with the white hair politely thanked the young fellow, but declined the tip and disappeared into the hallway to greet the next new student.

The following day there was an opening Communion service to mark the beginning of a new academic year, and the freshly-arrived student joined the rest of the seminary community at the service. After the opening hymn and processional, he was horrified to see that the man he had assumed was the porter was wearing full vestments and presiding at worship. When he whispered to a neighbor, the young student learned that the white-haired man was the president of the Seminary, the illustrious Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin. Rushing up to President Coffin afterward, the student began to pour out apologies for so harshly commanding Dr. Coffin to carry his bags. The great scholar-pastor-teacher allowed himself a small smile, and gently answered, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. We must do likewise.”¹

In Luke we hear, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus is practically quoting chapter 25 of the *Book of Proverbs* when he says this—listen how close it is: “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.”

This illustration probably goes back much further, as many of the pieces of wisdom that we hear in *Proverbs* are borrowed from even more ancient stories still. It is told in many ways, including Jesus’ own story about a wedding banquet, and its meaning is self-evident. It also has two parts: First, we shouldn’t assume to exalt our own positions, but second, in taking the humbler position, we should invite the forgotten to the table—those who would not be able to come on their own accord, and who would come to be fed, not to be seen.

The banquet Jesus was invited to had to be the first-century equivalent of an elite private club’s dining room. The point of being there was that you had achieved success and social status

high enough to get you in the door. But just attending is not enough. Eating is not the function of this meal, rather, it is seeing and being seen, and from the highest seat of honor. Being seen as a success is the real driving force behind everyone's attendance.

Any of you who have ever attended a high school class reunion may grasp my metaphor. Sure, we know what it is all about before we even go to it, but once there, many of us behave no differently than anyone else. A high school reunion is like training wheels for judgment day. It is a day of reckoning about what we've done, who we are, and of judging one another's success. Who drove up in the Mercedes? Who puttered up in the battered Plymouth Duster? Who managed to marry the beautiful/handsome/wealthy/famous spouse? Who did about what we expected? Who has the most prestigious job? On and on we go in this reckoning, as if the First Bank of Common Sense suddenly placed a stop-payment on our reality check.

Some come to these reunions hardly able to wait for somebody to ask that all-important question: What are you doing? Well, I'm important! Others, on the other hand, steer the conversation away because they are so convinced that they don't measure up. It all depends on their perspective of success.

Christian writer Mike Cope says, "Success is our national battle cry. We eat it, breathe it, caress it, baby it and, even worse, judge ourselves by it. If I think I've lived up to society's standards for success, I'm a success. My ego is in good shape. I feel good about myself, so I treat you well. But if I don't think society sees me as a success, I see myself as a failure.

"In America, we pay homage to the trinity of wealth, power and prestige. We bow down before them. If we cannot find them in life, we think we've missed our calling."²

The Gospel reading includes two parts: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, AND, invite the forgotten; those who are marginalized. As the author of Hebrews notes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The tragedy that played itself out on the news this week is about a man, a United States Senator, who claimed the positions espoused by those in power in his particular circle, and took an exalted seat as one who championed positions that marginalized others. Others, as it turns out, such as himself. Instead of using his position in a sense of compassion to invite those others one the outside to the banquet and helping to provide a welcome table for them, his deep sense of shame made him shun them. He turned inward in denial and self-loathing, playing the part of a champion of what some call "family values" in a play of his own creation; weaving a web of hypocrisy and delusion that caused him to be the deserved author of his own Greek tragedy.

When we sacrifice our own souls for what others define as "success," we come under the frightening grip of what theologian Walter Wink would call a "negative spiritual power."

Human measures of success rely on cutthroat competition and "survival-of-the-fittest" strategies. Over a hundred years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson, commented on this self-centered drive toward success, sadly concluding, "We are great by exclusion, grasping and egotism. Our success takes from all what it gives to one. It is a haggard, malignant, careworn running for luck."

And yet, Emerson went on to note three qualities he deemed marks of true "success:" the ability to discern and appreciate beauty, the ability to see the best in other people, and a commitment to leaving the world a better place, either by doing one's own work better or by making it easier for others to do theirs. Are these our goals, or have our goals shifted in ways so subtle and so long in the making that our own sense of success shouts down the news of uninsured children and the continued snips at the social safety net?

Jesus said, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." To whom is he speaking today, if not to us? The warning, as old as the same words recorded in Proverbs and their source before that, is a call to humbleness. And then, the invitation is for those furthest from the seats of power to have a place at the banquet—a place to be spiritually fed and physically nourished.

Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts."³ I think Mother Teresa would point to this story in Luke to justify that response. Jesus is saying in essence, don't do things that bring you the honor of men, do things for which God will honor you, and you will have a place at the welcome table, the table that is even now prepared for you.

Sermon Resource

1. There are different versions of this story but all contain the same elements. I have not found an original author.
2. Mike Cope, "Living in Two Worlds." Nashville, Tenn. Christian Communications, 1987. p.21.
3. Brett Blair, 1998

Scripture for Sunday, September 2, 2007

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" 7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. - 15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1,7-14

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. - 7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place," and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 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 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."