

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 28 2016

“Table Manners.”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

“One Sabbath...when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees...they were watching him.” “They were watching him.” He was invited so they could watch him.

This was no happy occasion. They watched him, and he gave them plenty to see and hear. He couldn't leave well enough alone....

We all want to be recognized, appreciated, made to feel important. We all want to be somebody. A banker was visiting a customer's farm. He nodded to a figure in the farmyard. “I suppose that's the hired man,” he said. The farmer replied, “Naw, that's the first vice president in charge of cows.”

All of us want to be recognized. All of us want to believe we are important. Alex Haley, the author of *ROOTS* served in the Coast Guard during World War II. Because of his race, Haley's jobs were limited to the kitchen. One job was serving coffee to the captain, who usually was so busy reading magazines that he ignored the person serving him.

But one day the captain observed, as he lifted his cup, “There's a good article here by an Alex Haley. Same name as you.” The server replied, “I am the Alex Haley who wrote the article.” After that, the captain made fewer calls for coffee and many more conversations with the author.

We all want to be recognized. We all want to be appreciated. We want to know that somebody notices. It is universal.

It cuts across generations, across social classes, across gender. We all want to be recognized. Someone said, “The deepest principle of human nature is a craving to be recognized.” We all want to be part of the beautiful people looked up to, respected, even envied. That's part of human nature.

Sometimes people go to extreme lengths to acquire recognition. In fact, one reason many people get in trouble is that they want somebody to notice them. We know that is common for children to misbehave in order to draw attention. There are adults who misbehave for the same reason. People will go to great lengths to be noticed, to establish their place in the world, to gain recognition sometimes to their own detriment.

Even in church, we play such silly games. For example, did you know that the word pew comes from the French word *puie*, which means “raised place.” In the early years of the United States, some prominent families were allowed to sit in roped off sections, separate from “the rabble.” These “seats of snobs” were known as pews. When the church finally realized that this tradition was ridiculous, not to mention unbiblical, it disposed of seats of honor. All benches became known as pews. In the eighteenth century, certain families were allowed to buy their pews. If the families had box pews, they would sometimes decorate them even installing armchairs and fireplaces.

The same practice was also common in Germany. I remember that the last seats on either side of the aisle were surrounded with lattice and a door. These rows were owned by the rich people of the town. I remember that my mom and I at times sat in the one on the left because we were late or someone invited us to sit there. Oh, the games people play for status, for self-importance, in an attempt to become one of the beautiful people.

Jesus was in the home of a prominent official. He noticed that all who came for dinner were trying to sit near the head of the table so people would recognize that they were important. Jesus gave them this advice: “If you are invited to a wedding feast, don't always head for the best seat. For if someone more respected than you shows up, the host will bring him over to where you are sitting and say, “Let this man sit here instead.’ And you, embarrassed, will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! Do this instead, start at the foot; and when your host sees you he will come and say, “Friend, we have a better place than this for you!’ Thus you will be honored in front of all the other guests. For everyone who tried to honor himself shall be humbled; and he who humbles himself shall be honored.”

So, it's all right, Jesus says, to want to be one of the beautiful people. It's perfectly natural to want to sit in the honored seat. However, he says, most of us follow the wrong strategy. We puff ourselves up and we think that makes us more beautiful. We couldn't be more wrong. There is nothing more honored than genuine humility, nothing more attractive than a warm, relaxed smile nothing more winning than a sense of confidence that wherever your seat is, it is the best seat in the house.

However, Jesus says, there is one thing more you can do. Jesus turned to his host. “When you put on a dinner,” he said, “don't invite friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors! For they will return the invitation. Instead, invite the poor, the cripples, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the godly, God will reward you for inviting those who can't repay you.”

The most beautiful people in the world are those who care for the least and the lowly. Was there ever anyone more beautiful than Mother Teresa? At least in our life time?

Want to become a truly beautiful person? Look around for someone in need and make a sincere attempt to help. A person in need is not necessarily on who is poor. They may be a shut-in who is lonely, a teenager who is misunderstood, an ill person who is feeling rejected by friends and God. There are many needy people in this world. We meet them every day. If you really want to become part of God's elite, see what you can do for them. Jesus said, "God will reward you for inviting those who can't repay you."

A school bus was making its final round of the day. A young boy jumped off just as a man jogged by. "Hey mister," the boy shouted, "can I jog with you?" The jogger wasn't in a hurry so he nodded and the boy joined in jogging. Within five minutes the boy gave this jogger pretty much his whole life story. His name was Matthew, he was ten years old, intelligent and full of life.

Abruptly, however, Matthew stopped. "Look at this," he ordered as he showed the jogger an 8 ½ by 11 inch piece of paper that had been laminated. In big black letters across the top it said, "Fourth Grade Math Whiz." Underneath was Matthew's name, the school name, the date and the teacher's signature.

His pride was undaunted. "I am a math whiz," he went on beaming, not waiting for the jogger to come to that conclusion by reading the paper only inches from his face. "Last year my sister was the math whiz," he continued, "but this year, I'm the math whiz!" "That's great," the man replied. "Yep," said Matthew. "But you know what's really great? When I get home, my Dad's gonna be real proud."

And isn't that what we all really want? We want to make our father proud, our mother proud. We want to earn the esteem of family members and business colleagues and friends at church. And that's fine.

But more important than all of these, says Jesus, is to make God proud of us. We do that when we look around to those who are helpless, hurting, destitute, and do something for those who can do nothing for us in return. It's all right to be one of the beautiful people, says Jesus, as long as you understand who the beautiful people really are. They are not those who are always buying more trinkets than their neighbors. They are those who are using the blessings of life to bless others.

All in all, it wasn't a comfortable dinner that day, but we can hope some attitudes toward humility and sharing were changed. Given some of our attitudes on status and benevolence, it may not be comfortable for us to read and hear about it today either. Still, we can hope that we will be changed.

O, Lord, help us to remember those who it is easy to forget - those who need not only our charity, but our love and concern, our faith and our Lord. Amen.