

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE PROTOCOL OF THE KINGDOM

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

10n 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. 7When 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; 9and 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. 10But 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. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12He 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. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

DIAGNOSIS: Humbled

Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem) : *Jostling for Position over Others*

As Jesus observes the simple everyday affairs of human life, symbolized and summed up here by a banquet dinner, he can't help but comment on the pandering character of human behavior, our behavior. Concerning ordinary people, notice first, how they are constantly jostling among themselves for the best positions in life. But even more, as they do, notice how their life is reduced to striving to impress those in power, those who might impact their future for better or for worse. Concerning those in power, notice how they too love to play the jostling game. To this one they say, "Come higher." To that one they say, "Come lower." But notice, they never act with the interest of those whom they are elevating or demoting in mind, but only with their own interests in mind. Indeed, they are as desperate as their guests to have quality people pandering to them, for the sake of their own sense of honor, value and worth. Such is the pathetic, pandering way of the world.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Self-Exalting, Competing*

Jesus, of course, is not simply giving us a lesson in banquette etiquette or social ethics. Jesus' commentary on life presupposes that finally—and ultimately—every person is being judged. Jesus here stands as the foretold "Son of Man," the end time judge, come early, who is perfectly equipped to see through the human game of musical chairs. What he is exposing in this instance is, not a people with "honor" (v. 7), but a dishonorable people who presume "honor" at the expense of others. Humankind lives not in faith and confidence of its "righteousness" vis-à-vis God (there is no basis for such

confidence!) but in the lesser, illusory idea (call it civil righteousness) that they might be better than (exalted over) their brother or sister and somehow be overlooked by the judge.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Humbled, Excluded*

Of course, though such an illusory game of musical chairs may seem to work for a while, truth be told, the day will come when the judge will get around to approaching the chairs (the standing) of every person involved in this jostling for position and say "Come lower." Indeed, in this parable Jesus rather understates the case. Not only will humans, exposed for their dishonor, be placed "lower," but, as other parables further elaborate, they will be excluded. The image of musical chairs is most apt. As the day of reckoning approaches more and more chairs are also removed, so as to leave room only for the righteous. Indeed, as Luke makes clear, only One who will be found righteous is the Son of Man, the mysterious end time judge, the standard of righteousness, who is now already broadcasting his stand of judgment for all to hear. In comparison to him, "The Human One" (as Son of Man is sometimes rendered), all humanity falls short and is rightly excluded.

PROGNOSIS: Exalted

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Son of Man Humbling Himself*

All would be lost, were it not that this same Son of Man, present in the person of Jesus, has in the mean time decided to exchange his place of honor for a humiliating cross of shame. By so doing he turns the usual protocol of judgment on its head and calls it the Kingdom of God. In him, righteousness is now defined as humility; honor is defined as bearing the shame of the cross. That this is so is sealed by the fact that God has raised him from the dead and has exalted him to the chair of honor and glory in the banquet of God. It is now his cross and

his humiliation that becomes the standard of judgment for what is righteous and honorable.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Befriended, Expanding the Circle of Honor*

What Jesus has accomplished in his death and resurrection, he now extends to those whom he calls “friend” (v. 10), one of Luke’s favorite terms for describing the way Jesus expands the kingdom. By so doing Jesus invites them to first “come lower,” to come where he is, to the truth of the cross, of shame, and humility, to embrace in faith the honest life of confession, because it is from our association with him that true honor and righteousness emerge. In a sense, Jesus opens access to the kingdom’s banquet by adding crosses of humility to serve as seats of honor. To trust in this invitation to “come lower,” to embrace the humility of the cross, is the new protocol of the Kingdom of God. There is always room for another cross in the banquet of the Kingdom—including for you and me.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Living in a Way that Exalts Humility*

As Jesus observes the life of those in his Kingdom, here is what he sees. People humbling themselves in the presence of one another; people exalting one another in the friendship of Christ. That’s because he himself ever remains, even in his state of exaltation, the crucified one, a humble servant and faithful friend. And so do we! That’s simply the protocol of the Kingdom of God.