

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 17C/Lectionary 22]

Proverbs 25:6-7

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

A Sermon for Every Sunday

No matter what the circumstances are, I think everyone likes the feeling of getting a better seat somewhere than the one you were originally given. It could be a sporting event when you slip down to vacant 50-yardline seats at halftime. It could be at the theater when they ask people to fill in empty seats up front at intermission. It could be at your elementary school student's recorder concert when you get offered something close to the action. And, let me tell you, there's nothing like attending an event in an elementary school auditorium for finding out just how cut-throat our society has become.

One time about twelve years or so ago I found myself in a situation where I ended up with a much better seat than I started with. I was serving a congregation in Pittsburgh, and one of my parishioners, who knew I had once lived in Egypt, sent me a newspaper clipping announcing that a Coptic Orthodox church in another community about 20 minutes up the road was going to be holding a special worship service to consecrate their new worship space. The Coptic Orthodox Church is the branch of Christianity "native" to Egypt, which is where I served my seminary internship. One of their traditions is that any time a new church building is acquired or built, the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church needs to come and consecrate it, set it apart as a sacred space.

When I was in Egypt, I worshipped at a number of Coptic Orthodox Churches there. I also knew that they absolutely adored their pope, Pope Shenouda III, or "Baba Shenouda," as they lovingly called him. He was a famous figure in Egypt, almost like a celebrity, but he was also very accessible to his people and to the people of Egypt. So this parishioner of mine saw this in the local paper and thought I might be interested in it.

As it turned out, this special service for consecration was going to occur on some random Tuesday morning that I happened to have free, so I drove down to the church in Ambridge, PA, parked my car on the street, and went inside. There I found a church full of dozens of people who looked like they were getting ready for a big worship service. Every single one of them looked like the people I had known in Egypt, so I wasn't surprised. I was just surprised that there were so many of them in that area of Pennsylvania. No one seemed to notice I was there, so I just went and sat in one of the back pews (Lutheran habits come in handy sometimes) and waited for things to begin.

I had only been sitting for a few moments when someone appeared at the end of my pew and asked me if I was their "distinguished ecumenical guest." The gentleman's question made it sound like they had invited a specific ecumenical guest that day—a clergyman from another denomination—but I had just shown up because I had seen the article in the paper. I politely told him that I was not their ecumenical guest. He wouldn't accept my refusal. He said something like, "Yes, yes, you are our guest, and sitting back here is not OK." He then escorted me all the way to the very front pew. Beside me was one other person—a local Episcopalian priest who was also there just because he'd read it in the paper. Suddenly we were both guests and we were both official, and we were both sitting about 10 feet away from Pope Shenouda. At the end of the worship service, the Pope called both of us up front and presented us with a special token of friendship and honor.

It was really amazing. I felt honored and welcome, and I kept thinking about how I'd lived a whole year in Egypt and never once saw Baba Shenouda and here I am 20 minutes from

my house and I'm shaking hands with him. And yet the whole time I kept hoping that there wasn't some other "distinguished ecumenical guest" who actually had been formally invited somewhere in the pews behind me thinking, "Hey...I'm supposed to be up there, not that guy!"

Even Jesus seems to understand the benefit of being asked to move up to a higher seat. We hear about this one time when he is invited to eat a meal at the leader of the Pharisees' house and he basically gives that advice: don't insert yourselves into places of honor and dignity. It's better not to self-promote. Take a place lower than you may even think you deserve and let that be how you start relating to people.

To understand what's going on here at this meal it helps to understand just how important mealtimes were in ancient culture. They were a vital and maybe even the central part of the honor-shame society that the people of Jesus' time lived in. At whose house you were eating and in which particular spot you were sitting mattered a big deal. In an honor-shame society, everything someone did was to accrue honor for your and your family's name and avoid shame. Honor only meant something if it was publicly recognized; that is, if other people saw you do something honorable or witnessed honor conferred upon you. Likewise, shame was so damaging precisely because everyone else agreed that you were of less value. It wasn't just something you felt in your own heart.

It was kind of like an ongoing popularity contest on a large scale, except everyone believed that there was a limited amount of honor. That meant you and I were essentially competing over the same honor. If I did something that increased my standing in the community then everyone else's honor went down just a little. That's not really what happened to me that day in the Coptic Church. No one else's standing was diminished because I was treated with honor. They were just being gracious.

We don't really live in an honor-shame society anymore, but an argument could be made that social media is bringing it back. There is a lot of honor and shame involved in Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. When you put a photo or a thought on there, you are hoping that it gets lots of likes or retweets or comments. Comments, especially positive ones, are gold, and you're almost instinctively prone to measure your own status on social media against everyone else's. The point of social media for many people, especially celebrities, is to get as many followers or friends as possible.

Honor-shame societies are really damaging and dangerous. People get shamed and shunned and shunted out of real community very easily. One expert in social media consumption in youth culture, Collin Kartchner, says that social media teaches young people that a person's "worth isn't inherent, but contingent." That is, it sends the message I'm not enough as I am. I need to fight for value among by peers or among the public at large. Just ask a kid who has been bullied at school or cyberbullied. These wounds have lasting impacts on our identity, and there are lots of studies out there about the effects social media use is having, especially on our youth. What's happening to Jesus in this meal at the Pharisees' leader's house is that Jesus has just gotten a bunch of "likes." Almost everyone would have known that he had received an invitation to this important person's house. Jesus' honor, in the sight of everyone, would have gone up. And so he's sitting there with his newly-accrued honor, most likely in the midst of a bunch of new faces a lot more well-connected than the crowd he usually hung with, and he takes the opportunity to flip things.

He first gives this lesson about how to place yourself in relation to others. Don't essentially be grabbing honor from others by taking something you may even rightfully deserve.

Humble yourself. Don't be confrontational or see yourself in competition with others. Let someone else have the honor that you might want to receive.

Then he takes his lesson one step farther, throwing the whole system of honor-shame on its head. He says, when you throw a party or have a dinner, specifically invite people who cannot give you any honor in return because they are not in a position to reciprocate. The blind, the lame, the poor—these are the folks in Jesus' time who are always going to miss out. They are never going to receive any invitations anywhere. No one includes them, no one thinks they have anything to offer, no one gives them any value because they can't give any value to anyone else.

Social media isn't all bad, of course. For a while I've followed this one account called, "The Afghanistan you never see." It is run by a photojournalist from Afghanistan named Bilal Sarwary who travels the country and showcases the raw, natural beauty of rural life and landscapes. He loves his native land, and so he expresses that by featuring the side of Afghanistan that never gets any mention because it's not about war or religious extremism or the opiate trade. As it turns out there are wonderful stories to be told and beautiful vistas to see in Afghanistan if you just look beyond what grabs all the attention.

God loves this native land, his creation, and his kingdom, therefore, is going to be about the people you never see, the situations that never grab the attention, the stories that never get told. It's about turning the honor and shame system upside down so that those who are always marginalized, those whose voices never get heard, those who are assigned minimal value get a place at the table. Jesus is going to believe in this mission so much, he's going to be so confident in God's love for all people, he's so sure of the importance that the rich be sent away empty and the poor be filled with good things that he is going to give all his honor away. Every last bit of it. Jesus is going to take all the "likes" he has accrued and is going to give them away to us. And he is going to take the lowest seat possible. It's called the cross. Suffering. Rejection. So that if anyone ever finds themselves in a place like that, they're not sitting alone. And he does this to show that God's view of his creation is one where people work together. They do not grade one another on shame or honor or beauty or wealth or status or popularity. The kingdom of new life, of eternal life, is the kingdom where everyone is seen.

So often I think we come to the conclusion that the way we help bring about God's vision for the world is through grandiose things: build a hospital. Dig a well in a foreign village. Contribute a huge sum of money to alleviate poverty or hunger. Give countless hours of free time to volunteer. And while the church has done many of those world-changing things, and will continue to need Christ-followers to dream big, what Jesus says at that dinner in the Pharisee's house is that the kingdom also comes just by seeing and paying attention to those we neglect in ordinary, everyday situations. None of us may ever do something like found an orphanage but we can commit to seeing God's image revealed in others, especially those we tend to look away from. No matter where we are, we can find someone seated at the back, on the side, alone, swallow our honor, walk up to them and say, "I see you. Come sit with me." And Christ, with all his love and joy, pulls up a seat too. And the real party will begin!

Thanks be to God!