

Year C, Pentecost 15, Proper 17c

August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016

By Thomas L. Truby

Luke 14:1-14

### **It's All about Ranking and Rivalry and How to Escape It**

It's the Sabbath again and Jesus is invited to share a meal with one of the leaders of the Pharisees. Apparently some of the other leaders are there too. They are watching Jesus closely.

In the part our skips over, verses 2-6, a man shows up at the meal with dropsy. According to The New Interpreter's Study Bible:

“In the ancient Mediterranean world, dropsy, the swelling of the body due to an excess of fluid, was used as a metaphorical label for the greedy. Persons with dropsy suffered from an insatiable thirst in spite of the fact that their bodies already retained too much fluid. The same is true of those who grab after money and prestige—just the sort of people with whom Jesus is breaking bread on this Sabbath.”

The story of the man with dropsy is a kind of action-parable. The man is one of them and at the symbolic level he is afflicted with a disease they all suffer from. He has an advanced case of grasping after something he already has too much of.

They are watching Jesus closely when this man with dropsy shows up right in front of him. Jesus asks the lawyers and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” Do you see the ethical dilemma into which Jesus has placed them? The man is one of them but he has a health problem. If they say “no” he shouldn't be healed, they violate their friendship and reveal they don't really care about him. They don't really care about him because secretly they feel they are better than he, since in their eyes, God has cursed him with dropsy. If they say “yes” to his healing they break their rule about work on the Sabbath, show favoritism to one of their own class, and disrupt their ranking since his healing will make him no longer available to be the bottom rung of their group.

They sense the dilemma and remain silent. They can't take decisive action in any direction; gridlock grasps them, phenomena we know well. They are a group built on the unity formed of exclusion where acts of kindness, healing and inclusion cannot be affirmed.

Noting their paralysis Jesus observes that if their child or an ox fell into a well on the Sabbath they would immediately pull it out. Why are they unable to act with this man who is one of

them? Could it be the man with dropsy is a rival? How he presents himself has bearing on how they are seen. He is like the drunk in their group who is tolerated because he fills the lowest place. He makes it possible for them to know who they can all look down on and feel superior to; but if Jesus heals him he is no longer available! The Pharisees and lawyers can't reply to any of this. Jesus is operating in the area where they do not know what they are doing even as they do it. While this mechanism of sacrifice absolutely runs their behavior it is totally outside their awareness.

On the symbolic level Jesus has just healed an addict. He has healed one of their own who grasps after more and more when he actually has too much of what he is grasping for already. Jesus heals one of them who suffer from the same affliction with which they are all suffering. They have too much and they want more.

The text says "Jesus took him and healed him and sent him on his way." That Jesus "took him" suggests he filled him with the spirit of Jesus; a spirit that alleviates his cravings and gives him a sense of self-acceptance and peace. That Jesus "sent him on his way" suggests Jesus had him leave his social group who would want to pull him back to his old place in their system of relationships. He has moved on and escaped the bondage into which he and this group of Pharisees and lawyers were entrapped. The group is speechless as these huge social changes unfold before them.

Jesus knows more about how they operate than they do! He observes how they arrange themselves according to who has the most status down to who has the least and how this produces conflict between them. Some think they are at a much higher rank than the host thinks and this gets them into trouble. Everyone wants to be as near the head table as possible.

It's an old and universal phenomenon. My ancestors moved to the Great Plains and bought a piece of land to escape it. They would rather put up with Nebraska's harsh climate than worry about ranking, hierarchy, and someone telling you where you had to sit. Of course, it wasn't long before a new ranking developed between those who owned their land and those who were renters. My mother's line where landowners going back to 1889 and the acreage that was our farm was double the usual quarter-section of land a farmer farmed. No wonder my mother (God bless her, I love her just the way she is) didn't like country music. It was the music of the class below her (and as you know, I have struggled to like it too).

My dad (God bless him, deceased a year now) escaped the landless renters' class by marrying my only-child mother. He worked doubly hard, harder than any farmer around it seemed, to show he was worthy of the promotion. All of this escaped me as a child though I was formed by it.

This in part explains a certain security and self-confidence my mother has always had. This security was rooted in the land she and her father before her were born into. Both were born in the house she still lives in. None of this is good or bad. It just is and very helpful to understand. We are formed by our environment more than we know.

In the story from Luke Jesus wants those present at the dinner to recognize their internal ranking system and its' inherit problems. His story takes the form of advice on where to sit when entering a wedding hall. Since it's so hard to know how others see you and so difficult to accurately rank yourself, take the lowest place and then let the host move you up if the host sees you ranked differently than you have ranked yourself. This is much better than starting too high and having the embarrassment of being asked to move to a lower place. Jesus assumes there will be ranking but suggests an attitude of humility wherein the host determines your place rather than you grasping for it.

In other words, don't worry about ranking. Leave that to the host and just enjoy yourself at the banquet. You have a place and it will be the right one since it is granted you by the host who sees you clearly. When everyone in a group isn't worried about ranking and trusts the host, a spirit of peace, contentment and harmony settles over the group. Instead of grasping for rank and honor trust that you have a place already. The greatest danger to you and to others is the discord that grasping produces. People who grasp will be brought low because they will misuse any rank they are given. In this way of interpreting Jesus' story, it's clear that we all have a place in God's love.

Then Jesus gives advice to the host of this Sabbath dinner. Don't invite your peers; those who will struggle with you and each other for rank and prestige. They will only invite you back, thus keeping everything equal and all obligations paid. No, invite those who don't have the means to keep tabs, those who have already lost in the competition of life, those who have been broken and no longer aspire to be anyone's rival. With the element of rivalry and competition gone, you will discover yourself blessed. You will feel part of something bigger than yourself, something timeless and eternal that smacks of justice and resurrection. Amen.