

A Change in the Air: Turning Privilege Upside Down

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Farmville Baptist Church

August 28, 2022

I cannot hear our first Scripture passage today, the one from Hebrews, without concentrating on the verse, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”¹ There is a timeless truth in that verse. It is a comfort to remember it when the world around us is going through change and chaos – as it often is – but that’s not why I zero in on that verse when I hear or read this passage. You see, the first time I remember reading this verse wasn’t in the Bible – it was in a submarine story.

I know, it isn’t the most holy place to first encounter a part of the holy scriptures, but Hebrews doesn’t get the same

¹ Hebrews 13:8

sort of attention in the church's preaching and teaching as the Gospels or the creation story or the Paul's letters.

Anyways, sometime in my elementary years I was reading a wartime memoir of a World War Two submarine captain, George Grider, and he shared about one particular Sunday meal in the officer's wardroom. The sub had been on patrol for a little while, and the meals were starting to get a bit repetitive. Grider and the other officers were giving the commissary officer, Eddie Atkinson, a hard time, because he was the one who oversaw the sub's meals.

“Eddie,” Grider said, “these meals are beginning to remind me of a verse in the Bible. It's Hebrews 13:8, I believe.”

The young officer didn't know whether or not that was a compliment – and the captain wouldn't tell him. So Eddie stuck his head out into the passageway, where the steward's

mate was standing. This steward's mate, a man named Page, was known for being a devout young sailor, so Eddie asked him for a Bible. The captain felt bad when the young enlisted sailor came back, because he knew the young man thought the officers wanted to have a devotional reading – and the captain really wanted to give the commissary officer a hard time because his meals were like Jesus: the same yesterday, today, and forever.²

When I was a kid reading that story, it made me chuckle a little bit. I don't personally think it's too sacrilegious, though the captain was concerned about the steward's mate thinking it was in bad taste. And any tightly-knit organization brought together under stress for a period of time, like a wartime sub crew, is going to need some good-natured ribbing to relieve the tension.

² George Grider, *Warfish*, 215-217.

But I'll be honest – when I went back and found that story this week, it wasn't the humor that struck me. It wasn't even the innocent irreverence. It was the hierarchy.

Now, it is no surprise that the military is a hierarchical organization. Armies and navies are structured with a pretty big divide between the leaders and the followers. But what hits me in this story today is that the officers were gathered in the wardroom of the sub, a place strictly for officers to eat, chat, and relax. Then one of them leaned out and got the enlisted steward's mate to bring a Bible, and then the officers dismissed him so they could have their private joke.

Friends, have any of you ever been on a World War II submarine? I've been on a couple, preserved as museum ships – and there isn't room on a Second World War sub to scratch your nose without everyone knowing it! The wardroom was about the size of a couple of booths at the

local diner. The passageway outside – well, I couldn't walk down it without turning my shoulders. And the enlisted men's mess, their cafeteria, was a slightly larger space about 10 feet away. If there is any ship in the navy where the hierarchies would struggle to endure, it would be a submarine!

And yet – while subs in World War II were much less rigidly structured than larger, roomier ships with more space to divide the upper echelons and the lower ranks, subs still operated on a strict hierarchy, a strict structure of who could give orders to whom. Even though every man's life relied on every other man doing his duty, there was still someone who was in charge and someone who wasn't, someone with all the power and someone there who could be bossed around.

This isn't unique to the military, of course. Take a look at almost any area of life, and we find that there are tables of

organization, unspoken pecking orders, long-cultivated structures of seniority which tell anyone who is involved in the company, community group, or even extended family where they stand in relation to everyone else. And the higher up the chain you are, the more perks you have – whether that’s the parking spot reserved for the CEO, the extra influence wielded in organizational meetings, the decisions of who plays and who doesn’t on the rec league softball team, or even who gets first crack at the food put down on the dinner table. We live in a culture that is built on hierarchy, on status, on climbing the ladder, and we measure it in all sorts of ways – what car we drive, what house we own, how big our bank account is, what school our kids go to, what title we have at work, how many trophies we have.

That’s the ecosystem we live in – and we’re no different than pretty much any other human society that has ever

existed. Sometimes, the status symbols are based on religious clout or family name or martial prowess or material wealth – but pretty much every human organization, community, and society has some sort of structure, and whenever there is a structure, there is a struggle to get to the top of it. Everyone wants to be privileged in life, because a privileged life is an easier life, a better life – right?

We see this happening in our Scripture passage today. Jesus, we are told, is eating at the home of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath. He's being watched, as the Pharisees are starting to get a suspicious feeling about this rabbi from Nazareth. Some of those suspicions are confirmed in the verses we skipped over in our reading, where Jesus yet again heals an injured man on the Sabbath. But before they can get really upset, the host pokes his head

out of the kitchen – dinner is ready! Everyone take your seats!

There then followed the controlled chaos that I'd imagine we're all familiar with: everyone tries to figure out where to sit. In this case, everyone there is trying to determine where it is to their advantage to grab a seat. Is there anyone there they need to butter up? Is there a "cool kid" who they can gain credibility with, a boss that they can impress? If they take *this* seat over *that* seat, will folks be impressed with how important they are, at least in relation to everyone else?

Luke tells us that, just as everyone had been watching Jesus carefully, he's watching them, too. And Jesus realized, as he saw them scrambling, that they looked at the world very differently than he did – and so he was going to share a bit about the change that was in the air. Luke says, "When

he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable.”³ And here, if I can get away with a slight quibble with Luke’s word choice, I think this is the least parable-like of all of Jesus’ parables. Jesus is sharing a “what-if,” not really a story but an imagining of a situation just like what they were experiencing in that moment. This sort of thing happened to them all the time, just as it happens to us all the time, and Jesus wanted them to learn something – but instead of telling a story of some pair of brothers in a hypothetical land, or a Samaritan who took care of a man on the Jericho Road, Jesus invites his listeners to consider what they would do, or rather should do, at a wedding feast.

Now, wedding imagery is used over and over again in the Gospels to describe the future joyous occasion of God’s great

³ Luke 14:7

resurrection and renewal of the world. It's an apocalyptic image, in other words – but there were also plenty of real-life weddings that these Pharisees had been to in their families and communities. They knew how everyone jockeyed for the best seats, the best tables. But what they should do, Jesus says, is act as if they are less important than they actually are. Otherwise, it could come back and humiliate them – they may just not be as important as they think they are – and who wants that? Better, Jesus says, to be humble – to actually be humble, and not just try to look humble – than to try to exalt yourself and be brought down a peg or three.

We forget, sometimes, in our self-indulgent, competitive world that humility is actually a virtue, not a vice. We turn on the television, pick up the newspaper, scroll through our social media feeds, and get bombarded with how everyone seems to be seeking the spotlight. “Look at me!” they

scream. “Follow me!” they plead. “Listen to me, I have the answers, I have the power, let me be your brain, your heart, your voice.” Humility has become a bit of a punchline; politicians and entertainers, athletes and business titans, they all want to be seen as the best, the greatest, the most flawless, the most powerful. And if someone is self-deprecating, is focused on the needs of others instead of their own wants, they are derided, treated with skepticism, and generally held out as an example of weakness and lack of...something essential.

But Jesus invites the Pharisees here to a new way, a different way. It’s the same sort of invitation he’ll give to his disciples on the last night they had together before his crucifixion. Luke records in chapter 22 how the disciples were debating who among them would be the greatest in the kingdom of God – but Jesus tells them, “The kings of the

Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”⁴

When Jesus’ kingdom starts breaking in, there is a change in the air – a change away from honoring self and towards serving others, a change away from grasping for power and influence and privilege and towards sacrificial love and gracious care of the least of these.

We don’t know if the Pharisees that night, looking for the best seats at the table, took Jesus’ words to heart. My guess is they did not. But then Jesus offers another lesson.

Turning to the host of the meal, the important Pharisee who had invited all these other important Pharisees, Jesus issues an invitation of his own. Most hosts, he said, invite to dinner

⁴ Luke 22:25-26

those who can reciprocate – those who are at least as important, wealthy, or privileged as they are. Perhaps Jesus said this with a bit of an eyebrow wiggle or some side-eye – it’s almost certain, from what we know, that this is exactly what the host that night had done. And why wouldn’t he? That’s how most people form their social bonds, throw their dinner parties, interact with other folks: they invite those just like them, people who can reciprocate, who can return the favor, who can repay them for their generosity. Now it wouldn’t have to be in the form of a dinner party, of course. It could be through political favors or speaking invitations or business leads or some other form of reciprocity. The key is that we human beings tend to be just like the host in the story, doing for others who are likely to do the same for us.

But that, Jesus says, is not how it should be, because that’s not how God is.

Fred Craddock points out, in his commentary on this passage, that “in the kingdom God is the host, and who can repay God?” If we, then, people of good faith – people like the Pharisees, who care about following God faithfully – if we want to be like God, then we should emulate God’s gracious generosity. “Jesus is therefore calling for kingdom behavior.”⁵ Jesus invites us, just as he invited the Pharisees and their host for the evening, to think beyond those who are just like us – and who can reciprocate towards us – to share our table, to enter our homes, to be in our lives. Instead of using our privilege, whatever form that takes, to further our own lives or feather our own nest, he invites us to be like God – and turn our privilege upside down.

“You invite your friends, your relatives, your rich neighbors – people who can pay you back. Don’t be like

⁵ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, 177

that,” Jesus says. “Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Invite those people who cannot repay you. Invite those people who cannot give you some tangible benefit, some extra influence, some deeper sense of your own importance. Invite the people no one else would invite.”

That’s a hard invitation to hear. Once we have privilege – even if that privilege is just a home of our own or a basic standing in the community – we don’t want to risk it. “But what if they steal from me? What if they get me sick? What if having them over means that so-and-so – someone I think is so important – won’t come? What if I shell out all this money on a meal for these folks and no one ever has me over for a comparable meal? What if I am somehow inconvenienced or cheapened or give up some of my privilege for someone else? Wouldn’t that be bad?”

Not in the kingdom of God, my friends. Not in the kingdom of God.

You see, Jesus says when we do these sorts of things – when we invite the poor and the neglected to eat with us, when we use our wealth to provide for them and our privilege to help them find a place at the table of life – when we do these things, we are the ones who are blessed.

“Although they cannot repay you,” he says, “you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” And if anyone should know if giving up privilege and power to help those who cannot help themselves is worth it, it would be Jesus.

After all, as Paul tells us, it is Jesus

“Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”⁶

If Jesus himself could humble himself, give up his power and
privilege to help us, to serve human beings like you and me,
to become obedient even to death for our sake – well, that’s a
definite change in the air of the world! Whoever heard of a
king becoming a servant, a slave? Whoever heard of a God
becoming flesh and blood? Whoever heard of a Lord going
to the cross?

We have. We have heard these things. And, if we are
faithful to our Lord’s invitation, we will step out on the path

⁶ Philippians 2:6-11

he has trod. We will help to change the world. And we do it, not by ignoring our privilege or rejecting our privilege, but by using our privilege for the glory of God by using to to serve our fellow human beings. We will live out what Rev.

Dominique Gilliard says is God's call for "privileged people to strategically leverage our access, influence, and resources to subvert the status quo and advance the kingdom."⁷ If we will turn our privilege upside down, we will find that there is room at the table for all of us – and that the table, long held to be the most joyous image of the kingdom of God, is a bountiful feast full of life for all.

⁷ Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*