



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Friend, move up higher!” **Sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14**

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We just heard Sophie read a proverb, which was some social advice on where to stand when you're among royalty. Be humble so that you can move closer to the king! It can be embarrassing to be asked to move away. You may want to keep that in mind the next time you're among royalty.

That proverb also reminds us that in humanity there is a hierarchy.

For example, do you know I sat next to Nicole Kidman at Starbucks? I didn't know I was sitting next to Nicole Kidman at Starbucks until Nancy Falls came into Starbucks and said, "Do you know you're sitting next to Nicole Kidman?" Sure enough!

What surprised me, and what's about to surprise you, is that Nicole played sitting next to me so coolly. It was like I wasn't even there. I can see why she won five Academy Awards. The restraint had to be killing her. The point is there's a hierarchy in humanity. Ranging from royal to peasant, from rich to poor, from VIP to "who are you?"

The proverb says that when you encounter the hierarchy, move on down so that you can move up. Jesus is about to say the same thing, unless he isn't.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On 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. ¹⁰ But 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. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹² He 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 and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Humanity comes with a hierarchy. But deciding the order is in the eye of the beholder. Who is number one in your book may not be so in mine. I found this out on Friday when I was thinking about all of this and asked a 90-year-old gentleman, "Outside of family, of all the people who is the most important to you?" He thought for a moment and said, "I think my urologist."

How many in here would say the same? The pecking order!

Our text is in the house of a leader! A leader of the Pharisees. And Jesus is watching as guests choose the place of honor. They're assembling a hierarchy - most important to least. How does a group decide? How would we decide? What would be our criteria? Urologists, followed by orthopedists, and then neurologists? That doesn't work for everyone.

We could do it by perceived wealth. It would have to be perceived wealth; we're not going to get out calculators and land values. We could look at the room and say, "This is a church!" We could do it by generosity! Not based on the number on the pledge card. But, we'd have to come up with a way to figure out how much each and every one of us was in...to being all in.

Devotion! Time spent in Bible Study or prayer? We could order ourselves from table to Narthex based on our prayer life! Perhaps the success of getting prayers answered is what's ultimately most important. "Donovan, call your prayer warriors, my sister has cancer!" And I know who are the ones on my list to call.

How does one decide? You look at the room. One would need to watch the room. Filled with Pharisees and leaders of the Pharisees and Jesus. And we would have to agree that the one at the top of the pile would have to be someone who could address our needs. Someone who could assuage our guilt. Someone who could cast away our worries. Someone who could provide some hope. Someone who could look past our offenses. Someone who keeps his on the muted sparrow.

In the church, we all agree that "every knee shall bend, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." And we know how Jesus got to the top of the list. It was because, "Jesus, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." How low can you go?

Think about that. There was a time when to find the most important person on earth you headed for the garbage dump outside of town. And this was the challenge for the early church! That before we started to wear gold crosses around our necks, it was the challenge of the followers of Jesus to prove that the one who was executed wasn't a criminal and got what he deserved. "No, he was innocent. He was God!" "Come on! What kind of god dies by the hand of the executioner?"

Imagine trying to convince the world that they got the story wrong! He's not a criminal. Innocent! Son of God! Raised! Every knee shall bend, and every tongue confess. How do you persuade people to put Jesus first in the room, in the world, in the heart? I don't know. But I suspect this is what happened in the early days. The followers of Jesus got down on their knees, and by prayer and by the spirit, they had the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. They humbled themselves.

They kept moving down the line so that others could take their place. When you decide to move out of first place, what happens is that the one in second place becomes first place and doesn't even need to burn a calorie to do it. It just happened, as if they were being raised up! Brought to the light!

Let the same mind that was in Christ. Forgiveness. Remember what they did to Stephen. Stephen, the follower who tried to persuade people that Jesus wasn't a criminal, he was God. After he tried to persuade and looked up to heaven, he said, "I see the Heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

After the crowd covered their ears and dragged him out of the city, they laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. They rushed Stephen, and as the stones began to fall on Stephen, they say his words were, "Lord, do not hold this against them."

Who's the most important one in the room? The one who forgives or maybe the one who is forgiven? It's quite a feeling when you get out of the doghouse. But who decides that you're out of the doghouse? The dog?

I remember when Jimmy Swaggart got caught. He got down on his knees on television and prayed, "Lord, have mercy." My father, the preacher, said, "crocodile tears."

I was thinking about going to seminary at the time and needed some education. I said, "Dad, how do you know when you're forgiven? How much groveling do you have to do before the scale is tipped so that there's a party for the son? How does God know, and how do we know that someone is truly, truly sorry? I said that to my dad. I don't remember his answer. Do you?

I think the early church didn't know the answer. They just kept forgiving and forgiving. "How many times must I forgive? Is seven enough?" And Jesus said, "seven times seventy." Having to move a sinner to the place of honor... that's hard.

But you have to understand, the world thought Jesus was a criminal, died on a garbage heap. And the church believed they got the story wrong. Every knee should bend, every tongue confess. And so, the followers of Jesus had to keep moving down, moving down, moving... so that Jesus - the precious name of Jesus - could be lifted up. And somehow, moving down made Caesar tremble in his boots.

Do you know that moving down is good for you? I read that in the *Wall Street Journal* this week. And who can argue with the *Wall Street Journal*? It was an article by someone who studies the effects of stress on life.

She was surprised by a time when she had stress in her life, because she flew on a business trip to Hawaii, and her luggage didn't make it, and she was supposed to give the keynote on stress to a bunch of suits. The hotel gave her a ride to some shops filled with the best in surf-wear. And a woman behind the counter saw and heard her predicament, and said, "Honey, what you need is 40 minutes away; take my car. And she drove off in a BMW convertible. When she brought the convertible back, she said, "That's how we take care of people in Hawaii!" And then the woman said, "And besides, I've been worried about my daughter who moved to the mainland. My hope is that somebody might do something similar for her in the same circumstance."

The article went on to say how researchers are discovering that meditation, massage, and breathing exercises to combat stress aren't nearly as effective as serving others. Do you want to feel better? Empty yourself just like Jesus. Go lower so you can be asked to move up!

And yet, I don't think that is what Jesus is saying. I don't think the Good Samaritan did what he did so he could get his name up in lights. A world full of "Good Samaritan Hospital." I guess that sacrifice was worth it! I think the answer to moving down is holier than that. Something other. It's like that sanctuary in Minneapolis. I mean, if you were going to put a hierarchy together of the people in that sanctuary on Wednesday. Where would you start?

I heard that there was a child who shielded another with his body. That story is hard to believe, but if that story is true, what do you suppose was going through that savior's mind? "This act will make me a hero." What do you suppose motivated the action? The action that said, "Your life is more important than I am." The wealth of the child being saved? The devoutness of the child being saved? The look of the child? How do you determine that one is worth saving?

I saw a photo of parents running towards the sanctuary that morning. Every parent has their mind on one thing: "My child. My precious child. Dear Lord, my child." I wonder, though, if it were your child who was saved by another, would that savior move up in the heart?

One day, someone will say to the media, "Don't raise the shooter up! Don't say a word. Not a name." One day, someone will say to the media, NO more investigative reporting into the shooter's mind. Stop it! Someone will say, quit giving them the attention they're dying for! And maybe, in the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *New York Times*, the times of our lives will emerge as a story about people who lift up other people. Saviors! So believing in nonviolence. So believing in innocence. So believing that Good News. So believing in resurrection. A story that begins on the bended knee.

I read about a 12-year-old boy who was bleeding, heading into surgery. He said to the surgeon, and we all know that a surgeon is the most important one in the room, "Will you pray with me?" This, said during a time when some say prayer is not the place to start...

Holy One, if you are here, then nothing else matters. And if you are not here, well then, nothing else matters. Friends, move up higher!

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