

Looking In a Mirror

Proverbs 25:6-7 | Psalm 81:1, 10-16 | Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 | Luke 14:1, 7-14

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

¹ 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. ... ⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸ 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and 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 honoured 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 or your relatives or rich neighbours, 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.'

INTRODUCTION

A Roman poet by the name of Ovid—who lived in the first century—composed what is probably the most well-known version of the myth of Narcissus. Born a handsome child, his mother took him to the seer, Tiresias, who said that Narcissus would live a long life only if he *never* discovered himself. As an adult, he scorned the nymph Echo, and the goddess Nemesis decided to punish him. One day, as he was hunting and became thirsty, this goddess lured him to a pool where he saw his own reflection. He fell in love with himself. He became obsessed, in fact. But as he realized that the reflection could not return his love, he withered away. This self-focus, this self-obsession that he felt is the origin of the idea of Narcissism. And both in the popular and clinical sense, Narcissism is characterized by a grandiose sense of self, a kind of self-importance, arrogance, and entitlement. But it also brings with it a lack of empathy for others. And so, my questions for you today are these: How do you think of yourself? How do you think of others? In one way or another, have this kind of self-focused tendency, this slight (or maybe not so slight) Narcissistic tendency. Jesus, in our Gospel reading, offers a rather different approach to how we might think of ourselves. In fact, his argument is perfectly stated in the middle of the passage—a kind of proverbial argument—and that what we must consider today: "*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"¹ In other words, get over yourself.

Luke begins our passage with a narrative introduction in verses 1 and 7. Jesus is attending a banquet of some sort, hosted by the leader of the Pharisees.² In *our* text, Jesus then offers two sets of advice: the first, directed to the idea of being a guest—find true humility, in verses 8-10, and the second, directed to the idea of being a host—find true generosity, in verses 12-14.

¹ Luke 14:11.

² In fact, the first 24 verses of this chapter are divided into four sections focused on this banquet: a miracle in which Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, recalling the tense encounter from last week's reading, the two short speeches that Jesus makes in our text for today, and then the actual parable of a banquet in the verses that follow.

1. THE ART OF BEING A GUEST

First, in verses 8-10, Jesus speaks to the guests: ‘it’s better to sit at a lower position at the table and be invited to a better spot, than to start at a good spot and be asked to move to a lesser place at the table.’ It draws on a familiar social hierarchy—an honour and shame culture. At a banquet or feast, people sat according to their place in society. The best spots, those closest to the host, were reserved for the elite. People of lesser status sat in lesser positions. That is, one’s place at the table signified and even reinforced one’s value or rank in society. And Jesus’s advice is simple. It’s strategic. It’s rational. ‘It’s better to choose lesser places and be asked to move up.’ It makes perfect sense. But remember Jesus’s primary argument in verse 11: *“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* These words show that advice is more than just advice...it is a comment on their hearts. Notice how Jesus uses the phrases: *“exalts themselves”* and *“humbles themselves.”* You see, this kind of thinking reveals something about how a person views himself or herself. ‘If I sit in the best place, it’s because I think I deserve it more than everyone else.’ The whole decision-making process hinges on what I think of myself. But Jesus’ statement turns the honour-shame system on its head. Acquisition of social status is not impressive to God. Humility is. Get over yourself. Exaltation cannot be taken, it must be given. And those who take it for themselves will be humbled.

This is a familiar thing theme from Luke’s Gospel. An old, barren, but faithful woman gives birth to John the Baptist. A humble peasant girl is chosen to give birth to Jesus Christ. In her song, the Magnificat, she sings: *“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”* And then Jesus challenges the social hierarchy throughout his ministry. He eats with the poor and the sinners.

2. THE ART OF BEING A HOST

But it is not just how we view ourselves that Jesus challenges. In verses 12-14, Jesus addresses the host challenges how we see others in relationship to ourselves. ‘When you host dinner... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Invite those who cannot possibly repay you or reciprocate in any way.’ Again, it sounds like proverbial wisdom, like social strategy. But it is radical in nature. It undermines the honour-shame culture. ‘Think more highly of the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. In fact, serve them.’³ But notice how he started: *“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.”*⁴ You see, some people will rise to the challenge of caring for others, serving others, being generous to others—but for what they can get out of it. If you are looking for reciprocity, it is *not* generosity. If you are doing it to look good, it is not generosity. Get over yourself. It is not about you.

3. THE ART OF BEING A SERVANT

Two sets of advice: To the guests, it is better to place yourself in the lower position. To the host, it is better to favour those of a lower status. True humility and true generosity leave no room

³ This, again, is thematic in Luke. Back in chapter 4, Jesus introduces his mission, his goal, by quoting a bit of Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* See Luke 4:18-19. It’s striking how Jesus’s own view of his mission is to share the good news with the lowest in society.

⁴ Luke 14:12.

for self-focus. And this, of course, flies in the face of our very culture. There are the traditional ways we focus on ourselves—the pursuit of individual freedom, wealth, and happiness and satisfaction, regardless of what is good. But add to this the more recent phenomena of the uncritical affirmation of self, self-realisation primarily through identity, and a culture that cannot tolerate being challenged. It is no wonder that the rate of diagnosing *Narcissistic Personality Disorder* is dramatically on the rise.⁵ We are all at least a little bit narcissistic. We are all a little too in love with ourselves.

Now to be clear, I am not talking about people who truly really need affirmation. There are people who suffer from debilitatingly low self-esteem—though interestingly, it is often also rather self-focused. But that is not most of us. There is a very short distance from self-esteem to self-exaltation. I am talking about we who are self-focused in rather mundane ways. There is the simple idolatry of me, my job, my reputation. ‘Do others esteem me highly?’ It’s all about my Twitter influence and my number of Instagram followers. There’s the decision-making process at work that revolves around what this person or that thinks of me. In the end, there is something fundamentally unhealthy about such a self-absorbed existence. But Jesus is quite clear on his solution: ‘Focus less on yourself. Do not think too highly of yourself. Rather, adopt a posture of humility. And then serve—generously serve—others who cannot repay you.’ In other words, get over yourself and focus on helping someone else. Who are the lame, blind, and poor in our society? Who do we dismiss and diminish, prejudicially and categorically, and without a second thought, so that we can focus on our own goals and happiness?

Remember: “*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*”⁶ Guess what? Jesus actually means this. And the very gospel itself demonstrates it. There is another banquet table, a much more important banquet table than this one. It the one symbolized by our Communion table. And there, Jesus did exactly what he said. He humbled himself. And thanks be to God that he did. Here is how Paul puts it in Philippians 2:

...though he was 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.⁷

Think about that for a minute. Jesus did not have to do that. If he were narcissistic, he would not have given up his divinity to become human, let alone subjected himself to a most gruesome death. But he humbled himself so that he might welcome those who do not deserve it—you and me, we who sin against and reject him—that he might welcome us to his table. Again, thanks be to God that he was not a narcissist.

⁵ See the DSM-V, which suggests that 6.2 percent of the population has *Narcissistic Personality Disorder*. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). See also several individual studies, including Jean M. Twenge and Joshua D. Foster, “Birth Cohort Increases in Narcissistic Personality Traits Among American College Students, 1982-2009,” in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2010, Volume 1.1., pages 99-106.

⁶ Luke 14:11.

⁷ Phil 2:6-8

So what do we do? Maybe it starts with the dinner table? Maybe it starts by inviting someone to breakfast that I know can't buy breakfast for me next week. Maybe it starts by thinking about someone in this church that you help out. Maybe it starts more simply, by giving that single seat, toward the back of strassenbahn cars—you know that one I'm talking about: where people stand in the way of those getting off the tram in order to dash to that seat, as though it is the seat of honour at a major banquet. Maybe it starts by giving that seat up to somebody who needs to sit more than me, and who will never give me another seat in return. If Christ Jesus can give up his seat in heaven to save me, to redeem me and reconcile me to God, surely I can get over myself, be humble, and care for someone else. No?

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with this simple thought. Six years ago, as I was preparing to preach on this same passage, Herbert Stenzenberger introduced me to a conventional greeting here in Austria. *Servus*. It is actually a shortened version of a Latin phrase that means 'your humble servant.' Now, I know that it no longer necessarily brings with it the sense of 'greetings, how may I be of service to you.' Nevertheless, what an amazing testimony about our Lord's service for us it would be, if we recovered that meaning, and actually meant all of what Jesus means by it, when we say that simple greeting: *servus*. As Jesus put it in the Gospel of Mark, "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"⁸ *Servus*.

Let me pray: *Father in heaven, help us to be less self-centred, that we may, each day, remember that we have been saved by your Son so that we may serve as he has served. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁸ Mark 10:45.