

Problem: How is Jesus defining humility?

-Imagine you are at a party, or wedding, or conference and you grab some food. You get your drink and your cutlery (maybe a napkin) and then face the array of tables. Now the ultimate question: where are you going to sit? Maybe I'm the only one who is challenged by this question, but I will go out on a limb that many of you have faced a similar situation once or twice. Because this is a big decision! (at least for me) I want to sit at the FUN table with the cool people. I don't want to work hard at the conversation or sit in awkward silence. So, you go closer and see some people ahead of you sit down. Nope, don't want to be at THAT table. This table might be a possibility, but I'm going to keep walking around and keep my options open. Even when I make my choice as to what the "cool" table is, sometimes that particular table fills up before I get there and I have been known to steal a chair from another table (of course from others who I don't really know) and weasel my way into the already full group. Well, it's a little snug to eat, but at least I'm cool now!

-So, OK, maybe you are not as obsessed with sitting at the cool table as much as I am, but I am willing to bet there have been situations in your life where the position at the table was important to you. We all, in our own way I think, jostle for positioning in life.

-So when I hear Jesus telling a parable such as this one which demands "humility", I get a little concerned.

-I guess Jesus is saying that I have to make myself be a more courteous guest. I guess he's saying that I have to be the martyr and give up my spot at the coveted "cool table". Is this what Jesus means by "being humble" in this story?

Solution: Humility is the act of "leveling" privilege. In other words, it is the act of celebrating that "there is enough" for all.

-Well to start off with, it doesn't appear that Jesus is stressing humility as being more "prim" and "proper". Infact, you could say Jesus was the worst dinner guest of all!

-We like to blame a lot on the the Pharisees, but It was the pharisees who opened up their home to Jesus in hospitality. Instead of being courteous, Jesus responds by being incredibly rude!! He's a terrible guest. 1) He insults all the guests and 2) He insults the host! It sure doesn't seem like he was humble to me. I'm not sure I would invite him back any more of my dinner parties.

-So if Jesus is not defining humility through being a courteous dinner guest, then what is he getting at?

-Maybe it starts with the actual word itself: (Honumi) χώνυμι (Greek) means "level earth/ground". So, true humility starts with a "leveling", or bringing back to "ground level".

-We get images of this humility all throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament Prophets: "Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level (humble) (Isaiah 40:4)"

-You know it's kind of interesting if you think about it: in the host's eyes (in this parable), there is no real "cool" table. Perhaps the most missed part of this text comes in verse 9 where it starts out: "and the host who invited *all* of you." ALL of you are invited, all of you are on the same ground/ level. So is it important to worry where you sit? If you are already invited, does it matter?

-When we think of "being humble", we probably can name a few famous people who in our mind reveal true humility: Mother Teresa, Ghandi, Pope Francis, The Dalai Lama. All of these people, according to public opinion, put themselves in the lowest of the low, lower than anyone else, in order to "serve". How many times have we heard: "I'm no Mother Teresa!" But I don't think that this is the humility that any of these figures were/are living and what Jesus is suggesting. Jesus isn't saying: put yourself in the lowest of the low position all the time everywhere and be a doormat, just put yourself on the same level as everybody else. True humility is a "leveling", not a fake competition of "how low can you go."

-If you ask me, an honest "leveling" can be much more threatening. So often when you feel like you should be at the "cool" table, humility feels threatening.

-I'll be completely honest, most of the time I do feel like I should be the one sitting at the "cool" table. Infact, much of American society has no problem, even encourages me to sit at a place of honor. Because of the white color of my skin and of my male gender I can get access to better education, better job, and more opportunities than other people. I don't have to worry about being pulled over by the cops randomly without really any reason or about being harassed and raped while walking home. I don't have to worry as much about being the target of gun violence.

-This is what you call privilege and a vast majority of people in our country don't have it.

Implication: How is this definition of humility relevant for us?

-The "leveling" (humility) that Jesus is talking about, then, challenges all of us to see privilege: to acknowledge who has it and who doesn't. The challenge of this story becomes, I believe, getting rid of the "cool" table all together: to realize that ALL of us are invited to this banquet and ALL of us are loved children of God who are on the same level ground. This is the humility that Jesus is talking about. This is our call as people of faith.

-There is an incredible video of Heather Mcghee, president of a Demos, a public policy lobbying organization who happens to be an African American, being interviewed on C-Span. She fielded a question from a man from North Carolina, who on national TV admitted his privilege and who asked Heather for her advice in "leveling" his prejudices. If you haven't seen the video, I encourage you to google it as it was incredibly powerful for me to watch. Her answer to this brave caller was simple: "So what can you do? Get to know black families, who are not all and not even by any majority involved in crime and gangs.....Turn off the news at night, because we know ... that, actually, nightly

news and many media markets that have been studied actually over-represent African-American crime and under-represent crimes that happen by white people. Start to read about the history of the African-American communities in this country... We are still a very, very segregated country.And we know that in order to be a “Demos” (“unified people”), that is united across lines of race and class and gender and age, we have to foster relationships. We have to get to know who one another actually is. And we are always, I think, as Americans, surprised when we build relationships across race.”

-Reaching out, getting to know others who are different from us feeds humility. For when we know one another and respect one another in our differences and similarities, we no longer have to feel entitled to sit in a place of honor. For the honor is being united on the same level as all of God’s beloved children. Amen.