

Sermon.

We can all relate to the embarrassment that we'd experience if we sat in someone else's seat, though our culture is so different from the ancient 1st century Roman world, that we might not appreciate what Jesus is getting at. Meals don't hold the same weight as they did in those spaces. Sitting in the wrong seat today wouldn't be cause for great shame. It would be slightly embarrassing, if it was brought up at all, which many of us might avoid so as not to feel embarrassed for pointing it out ourselves.

It's hard to imagine the weight of embarrassment, and really, shame, that would accompany sitting in the wrong seat at dinner. We don't value those seats in the same ways, or even the space of a meal at all. I thought about getting bumped up to business class on an international flight, only to discover that the original seat holder showed up after all, and you had to give back the glass of champagne and tilt your seat back up as you slumped back to coach.

But even that, while embarrassing, wouldn't affect your standing in society. It might speak to your place in society, that you can't afford to fly around the world in business class. But the shame is temporary. You wouldn't see that person again, thanks to that little curtain.

No, today, it is hard for us, in our individualistic world and culture, to really

understand the social obligation that was a part of an honor/shame society.

Maybe it was a bit like my Mississippi College experience, a Baptist school in the Bible Belt, where you didn't dare go to the cafeteria on a Sunday morning if you didn't go to church. And if you did happen to skip church that day, you better believe you would dress up in your Sunday best just to go get your patty melt and curly fries because you didn't know who you'd run into in that line. In that weird little fundamentalist bubble, shame and honor was at play in that weekly charade.

But when it comes to honor and shame, the deeper issue isn't one of expectations, I was flying coach and now I'm flying business class and now I'm flying coach again, so much as it's about motivations. To be esteemed by others or not to be put to shame by others. To give my esteem to others or to shame others. Or further, the framework necessitates that some are more highly respected than others, so that there's an order, a front and a back, a top and a bottom, a winner and a loser. In this way, in the underlying motivations, we do see glimpses of similarity between our culture and theirs, don't we?

Maybe an easy example, where this plays out most prominently is with the cultural religion of our day: sports. Winners and losers. Who wants to watch a game that ends in a tie? Who wants to *compete* in a game that ends in a tie? The winners get trophies and city parades and jewelry and

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Luke 14:1,7-14; Hebrew 13:1-8; 15-16

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bonuses and the adoration of fans. Of course, the losers can get booed at times, by their own fans, they don't get champagne, only awkward interviews with reporters on what "went wrong." They get talked about, critiqued, players get ranked and blamed and judged not on their skill but on whether they've ever won the "big one."

It's crept into our politics, such that we now consider voting for a different party to be less likely than a lifelong Red Sox fan rooting for the Yankees. Party loyalty is required above all else, and to venture away from it, in any party, is to induce the judgment of peers, colleagues, friends.

Social media magnifies this honor/shame dynamic, too. And peeling back our behaviors, on what we post or what we retweet or what we like or love or share, are motivations that reveal our fears, our hopes, our views of the world. Often, that there isn't enough credit to go around, enough love to be shared, enough respect to be earned or given or received. Everything is competition, our values are zero sum.

Jesus is cutting to the heart of this with his parable. In the kingdom of God, in this kingdom as we say, this reign of God's is a reversal of what our world values. Maybe it takes on different shapes and styles over the course of 2,000 years, but in the end we're still competing, still trying to be loved.

And Jesus is still calling us, today as much as then, to live with kingdom values of mutuality and equality and kinship. To see one another as equals, with dignity, and worth. He's calling us to love one another not for what we can get out of it, but simply because there is joy and meaning in loving someone well. In learning their stories and seeing how God is evident in their smile and tears and witness and way.

And it's so easy for us to forget, or to gloss over, because we have church once a week, and that's if we're here as often as we watch our favorite sports team, but otherwise maybe we're here once a month or twice a month or once a quarter. And all the rest of those hundreds of hours a week or thousands of hours a month, we live in a totally different world that calls us much more loudly and influentially, to live a certain way, within the system, where people still get ahead, and try to make it to the top, and know more about their political party's beliefs than their own sacred stories, and all of this clamoring and elbowing and shoving makes it easy for us to forget the ways that Jesus calls us to live.

And it's partly why we observe communion as often as we do, or some might say not often enough. To remind ourselves of a practical example of what it looks like to live in the way of Jesus. That at God's table there is no seat more honorable than the next because they are all seats of honor. There is no head or foot; all are welcome and received equally. No rich or poor, no more or less value, no more or less love, no

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closer proximity to power or privilege than the rest. Here, we gather out of sheer love, not to avoid shame. We gather out of a deeper calling to find ourselves and find others, not to fool ourselves or to fool others.

I sometimes wonder if the imagery of the table, if the power of such a metaphor and practice is lost on us because we don't value meals in the same way. In a culture that truly based seats on who was higher or lower, who used the meal in someone's house as a way to reinforce people's status, the radical notion of Jesus in this parable or at many other meals in the gospels or at the last supper that we imitate, it can be lost on us who don't live in quite the same way.

And I sometimes wonder if a different image wouldn't compute better for us, the radical notion that there are no winners or losers in God's realm. That we are all welcome fully and equally into God's reality, for this is how God sees us.

Maybe a monthly church softball game would do the trick, where no one keeps score, but we simply play for the joy of one another's company. Where everyone keeps swinging until everyone has gotten a hit, and nobody strikes out, and everyone scores a run, and all the sunflower seeds and Gatorade we can get our hands on will remind us of the life and love of Christ like bread and cup do today.

Or maybe we take the imagery of the table, of communion, and we work harder to apply it to our everyday lives. Those lives that unfold into exponentially more hours of your week than they do within these four walls. And instead of paying attention to, inviting, listening to, or giving authority only to those we know and love or those who can help us get ahead, we try out the posture of Jesus at the Table, and we invite and listen to and empower and give voice to those we don't know well or haven't learned to love as easily or who don't have access or proximity to power or benefits or influence. And in so doing we recalibrate our minds to be more in line with what our spirits are wanting anyway.

To love

and to be loved.

That's really at the heart of most of our motivations.

And the good news, the gospel today, is that in God's reign, like at a buffet that never ends, there's more than enough of that to go around.

Amen.