

Opening: The Center of Attention

- We all like to be the center of attention, don't we?
 - I mean, let's be honest now.
 - We may protest to the contrary, but when we are singled out for some special attention, like a birthday or retirement celebration, or recognition for some accomplishment, deep down inside, we REALLY like it.
 - It makes us feel important, even if only for a moment.
 - It is fulfilling for us- It's part of the human condition.
- Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke is about being the center of attention.
 - When Jesus arrives for dinner at the home of the Pharisee, he becomes the center of attention.
 - We are told that he was being watched closely.
 - Yet, as the other guests arrive, he notices that each of them strives to be the center of attention as they jockey for the best seats at the table.
 - The Pharisee seeks to be the center of attention by deliberately and carefully putting together his guest list, to include those members of the community who by their attendance will incur an obligation to return the invitation.
- In our culture, we are taught to seek to be the center of attention.
 - From the day we are born, we are taught to "go for it," to "fulfill ourselves" so that we can be whole and healthy human beings.
 - Like the banquet guests in Jesus' story, we don't tend to take the lowly seat in life.
 - Rather, we typically clamor for attention and actively seek the place of honor.
 - We tend to equate attention with success, and we like to be successful.
 - Even the little league ball team that loses every game, except they win the final game, runs off the field, holding up their index fingers and chanting, "We're number one!"

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- And there is nothing wrong with wanting attention.
 - We all need attention.
 - It's only when seeking attention becomes an obsession that we get into trouble.
- In this story, Jesus teaches us how to avoid becoming obsessive attention-seekers.

At the dinner table

- His lesson takes place at the dinner table.
- Biblical meals usually aren't about food alone.
 - The dinner table is often the centerpiece for stories of God's acts in the world.
 - Throughout his ministry, Jesus used the dinner table as a platform for sharing his deepest understandings about God
 - And he sees this meal at the home of a Pharisee as the opportunity for a teaching moment about "Kingdom etiquette."
- For people who are as hungry for attention as they are for food, Jesus gives a few pointers about how to behave as an invited guest.
 - His strategy is simple.
 - Don't go for the best seats first, but be humble and take the lowest seat; then the host has the option of honoring you by moving you up the social ladder.
 - We can imagine the disciples falling all over each other in an effort to get to the least impressive seat when they hear Jesus say this.
 - What Jesus is really saying is that we need to make others the center of attention in our lives.
 - God will give "us" all of the attention we need.

To the Dinner Host: Who to invite

- Jesus also has some words of wisdom for those who host dinner parties.
 - Hosting can be an act of real generosity if there are no strings attached to the invitation and nothing is expected of the guests in return.
 - Instead of trying to get attention by inviting people based on their ability to return the favor, Jesus suggests that we could use our dinner invitations as a place to practice God's grace, by allowing those who live on the margins of life to become the center of attention.
 - Sharing a meal and everything else we have with them.

- People on the margins—people with declining mental capacity, restricted mobility, advancing age, or disability—can begin to feel isolated.
 - Sometimes they put themselves on the margins- they isolate themselves.
 - And then there are people WE put on the margins.
 - People we think are overly assertive or aggressive.
 - People of a different color, nationality, or ethnic background.
 - People with an abrasive personality- people who offend us.
 - People just we just don't like.
- And then there are strangers.
 - And these don't necessarily have to be people we don't know.
 - People in our community, in our church family, even people in our own families can be “outsiders,”- “strangers” in the sense that they are excluded from the mainstream of our lives together, from our love, and from our acceptance.
- When Mike Kollin was a linebacker for the Miami Dolphins his former college coach, Shug Jordan at Auburn University, asked him if he would do some recruiting for his college.
 - Mike said “Sure, coach. What kind of player are you looking for?”
 - The coach said, “Well Mike, you know there's that fellow, you knock him down, he just stays down?”
 - Mike said, “We don't want him, do we, coach?”
 - “No, that's right.”
 - “Then there's that fellow, you knock him down and he gets up, but you knock him down and he stays down.”
 - Mike answered, “We don't want him either do we coach?”
 - Coach said, “No, but Mike, there's a fellow, you knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up.”
 - Mike said, “That's the guy we want isn't it, coach?”
 - The coach answered, “No, we don't want him either. I want you to find the guy who's knocking everybody down. That's the guy we want.”
 - (Illustrations Unlimited Tyndale, p. 466).
- And if we're honest with ourselves, isn't that the guy we want to be seen with?

- That's the guy we want to invite to our dinners and social gatherings, isn't it?
 - The guy with the right stuff, whom everyone knows.
 - The guy who is popular, sought after by nearly everyone.
 - Because deep inside we want to hang out with people who are the kind of people we want to be like.
 - We don't want to be seen with the guys who are always being knocked down- those whom Jesus calls "poor," "crippled," "lame," or "blind."
 - We don't want to be like them and they aren't invited to the table.

<PAUSE>
- If we were to make up a guest list of people to invite to our fellowship for dinner or to worship in church, would it be "those" people?
 - How might our church look different if we really broke bread with those whom the world or even our church finds offensive?
- And sometimes it is "us,"- the very people of the Church- who don't feel welcome at the table.
 - Maybe we feel like we have been left out, or maybe we have excluded ourselves intentionally because we are trying to cope with something.
 - Maybe we would feel out of place if we came.
 - And maybe we feel like we just don't deserve to come to the table- that we aren't worthy.
 - All of us have times when we think we are not good enough.
 - But when we feel this way, we need to remember that God invites us to the table regardless of what we have or haven't accomplished, or how we have experienced life, or what has happened to us.
- As followers of Jesus, we need to find ways to bring ALL of these people to the center of attention.
 - To bring them back to the mainstream.
 - To make them feel welcome - at our table, in our church, in our community, into our lives, in our personal space.
 - The world still teaches us things like "What's in it for me?"
 - "Show me the bottom line!"
 - "Don't get mad, get even!"
 - "Look out for #1, because no one else will!"

- “Good guys finish last!”
- We give to get
 - But our ways are not God’s ways.
 - God gives to everyone, especially to those who can’t give back, and expects nothing in return.
- And as the Body of Christ, the church is called to demonstrate this kind of welcoming, accepting love.
 - A love that applies equally to all humans—rich and poor, prominent and marginal.
 - By making up our guest lists with nothing expected in return, we make God the center of attention in our lives, and God’s ways become our ways.
 - And God promises a heavenly banquet, where the exalted have been humbled and the humbled have been given a seat at the table, and where everyone is whole and happy.
- Mother Teresa was once asked, “How do you measure the success of your work?”
 - She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, “I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. “
 - “He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts.”

(“Choose Life”, Simon Guillebaud, 2014 Monach Books)

Celebrating Communion

- In just a short while, we will gather at this table, to share a communion feast.
- As we do that, do think it should really matter where WE will sit?
 - Is it important whether or not WE are the center of attention?
- If we are paying attention and listen to the words of Jesus, we find it is quite the opposite.
 - We are to make it obvious to all guests at this table that we don’t have a pecking order.
 - That there is no dress code for Communion.
 - Because of what Jesus offers at this table- his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins- we need not worry about our attire, or where we might sit.
 - We need not worry about being the center of attention.
 - Rather, we are encouraged to prepare our hearts to experience Christ’s presence within us, through the Holy Spirit.

- And we are reminded to live into the reality that Christ is the center of our attention, now and always.
- May it be so this day and every day.
- Amen.