

“Check Your Privilege”

Luke 14:1, 7-14 Contemporary English Version (CEV)

1 One Sabbath, Jesus was having dinner in the home of an important Pharisee, and everyone was carefully watching Jesus.

7 Jesus saw how the guests had tried to take the best seats. So he told them:

8 When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the best place. Someone more important may have been invited. **9** Then the one who invited you will come and say, "Give your place to this other guest!" You will be embarrassed and will have to sit in the worst place.

10 When you are invited to be a guest, go and sit in the worst place. Then the one who invited you may come and say, "My friend, take a better seat!" You will then be honored in front of all the other guests. **11** If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honored.

12 Then Jesus said to the man who had invited him:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. **13** When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. **14** They cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you when his people rise from death.

Let's pray:

What do you hear?

How do you select your seat when you enter a gathering? What drives your decision? Why are you sitting where you are right now?

I don't think Jesus was giving us advice on social etiquette. Let's look a little deeper.

What was he really saying to his listeners?

I think he was talking about our human tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should. It's a case of I'm more important than you. I deserve to be

recognized and honored. I am more privileged than you! Wow! What a big EGO you might say!! And, you'd be right.

But - - we all do the very same thing quite naturally! Richard Rohr, the contemporary theologian and author, says it this way. "Most of us tend to cut every new idea or situation in half and eliminate that which we do not understand or things that are beyond our present experience. Not only do we divide . . . but we almost immediately judge one half to be superior and one half to be inferior! Watch yourself do this almost automatically. We compare, and as soon as we compare, we compete. Then, as some have said, we also crucify. This is the mental basis of much racism, sexism, war, homophobia, and prejudice.

Some traditions have called this mind game dualistic thinking: where you divide, separate, and conclude what's up or down, in or out, with me or against me, right or wrong. Pick your category: Christian or Non-Christian, black or white, gay or straight. Everyone's going to find some categories whereby they can divide the world to their liking. And isn't it convenient that our particular group always happens to be on the up side?! You'd think we would see the inherent narcissism and blindness in this."

I'm important, you're not. I'm in, you're out.

Much of the world is trapped at this level of "stinking thinking."

We compare and we compete.

The world just finished watching the best of the best athletes compete in the Olympic Games. So much of our lives are about competition - think about it. From the day we are born we are competing for our parent's or caregivers attention, recognition, and affection. I have yet to meet a child that doesn't desire to be recognized as special, to be first in line, to receive the largest piece of cake, to command most attention, to be the fastest runner, the best singer, the most gifted artist or best speller. As we grow we compare and are measured by our skin color, our school success and intellectual abilities, our athletic abilities, our body shape, size and looks, our status in the community, our financial state, our career choice, the car we drive, the neighborhood in which we live, the language we speak, the beliefs we uphold, and on, and on, and on!

When I read verse **7** "Jesus saw how the guests had tried to take the best seats." I am immediately confronted with the experience I witness every time I have a meal with our grandchildren - or get into a car with them. They all want to sit by Grandma - or Grandpa. Or, three of them wants to sit next to Emma, the oldest.

Or, everyone who is big enough wants to sit in the front seat. Needless to say all requests cannot be granted. So, whoever gets their choice, feels favored, privileged, special, and loved. Those who don't feel left out, dismissed, angry and/or sad.

Privilege.

I have delved into the subject of privilege a lot in recent years. As founding leader of this intentionally diverse congregation, I have made it a priority to examine, confront, and grow in my recognition of white privilege. I will not say I have "arrived" and that I am an expert on the subject. I don't know anyone who can say that. I do know there are many people who identify racially as white skinned that are on a journey of growing awareness. And, it is a journey; perhaps a lifelong journey for white skinned people raised in our racist society where whiteness is awarded certain unearned privileges that are not given to my darker skinned neighbors. Wherever one group is granted privilege and another group is not, there is oppression. It is that who's in and who's out, dualistic mindset Father Rohr was talking about.

As I mentioned earlier, there are so many arenas where we compare and compete, where privilege and favor exist. Some of these we are very aware of. In fact we can be downright obnoxious and boastful about them such as:

- Education level - advanced degrees, prestige of the school attended, academic honors awarded, etc. You may not be aware of this privilege if you think your level of education is not as much as others - and if you have any formal school education, you are more highly educated than a large number of the world's population!
- Financial means - Again, you may not be aware if you think your financial situation is not as much as others, but the very fact that you are wearing shoes and will have more than one meal today, makes you wealthy in a lot of peoples eyes.
- Professional status - lawyer, doctor, clergy, accountant, professor/teacher, nurse, counselor, social worker
- Workplace status - boss, CEO, manager, president, supervisor
- Community status - elected official, law enforcement officer

All of these achievements or conditions can be a potential for ego driven, self-agrandizing behavior - if you got it - flaunt it! It's a familiar refrain!

Unaware:

Then there are the areas of privilege we are often or frequently unaware of. This would include:

- enjoying familiar surroundings - church member, knowledge of norms & layout of the land
- Have no criminal record
- speak the common language of the community
- if you possess certain talents and skills - mechanical, musical, artistic, etc.
- if male - especially a white male
- employed
- have physical abilities of sight, hearing, able to walk, reach, move, bend, kneel, stand
- reasonably good mental health
- are a citizen and not an immigrant or refugee
- if you identify as heterosexual

It is my understanding that Jesus was not merely talking about social etiquette and hospitality in this passage. I believe he was getting to the root of our human tendency to compare and to compete - our human need and desire to experience being accepted, being special, of having value, of having power. When we experience recognition, affirmation and yes, privilege (like being invited to sit at the host table) it feels good, it feels powerful - it feeds our ego. And, our ego is what we can spend a lot of time and energy building and defending. Our ego is the image we want others to see and believe. Some call this the false self or the mask we wear to cover up the unacceptable parts of ourselves. Let's face it we all have those parts of ourselves that we hope no one sees or knows about! We polish our image, our ego, by comparing and competing with each other for some perceived prize, or reward. It is the ego that drives our need for recognition and power, our greediness, and our privilege! And, we create systems that support and ensure this power differential! - in society, in the criminal justice system, in the immigration system, in schools, in the workplace, in our families!

Jesus was telling his listeners to "Check your privilege!" He is challenging each of us to "Check our Privilege" - to become fully aware of ourselves - our authentic selves.

He is asking us to "Check our privilege" when we are blind to the plight of our neighbors who are the 'others', the outsiders, the unclean, the marginalized. To me this passage is calling Jesus' followers to practice true humility, uplifting one another and pursuing justice for all. - Not the false humility that says, "I am not worthy of attention, acknowledgment, of honor."

By the way, if this is what you have been thinking and feeling - it is my understanding that this is what the oppressive power systems want you to feel - to protect the unequal balance of power! This is how I understand “internalized oppression”. All people with dark skin in our society, or we women, or those whose gender identity is not heterosexual, or folks who are poor, we all have the potential of buying into this very pervasive LIE. And, it is a lie!!

This is the lie that says you are less, you are unworthy, you don't deserve, your voice doesn't matter. THIS IS A BIG FAT LIE!! And, society's power structures require us to all believe this lie for them to continue to exist and maintain the power!

(After walking from the front to the rear of the room...)

Jesus, as the teacher, and with the power of God, invites us to turn the room upside down. Just as I have done! I have power right now. I am speaking - commanding your attention - I am wearing my clergy stole - and I just walked to the rear of the room shifting all eyes to those sitting in the back. You, my friends, are now the honored ones - the ones sitting at the head table! I don't know your reason for choosing these seats today - maybe you wanted to be closer the the air conditioner or need to leave early. (if that's the case - oh well, we'll all get to see you go!!) But, perhaps you were having a bad hair day, or came in feeling a little down, a little blue, or little raw and vulnerable. Maybe you are not quite feeling connected with the rest of the congregation or are somewhat timid. Maybe on some level you are not feeling worthy of being up front and center like the Praise singers and the clergy.

Jesus says, you are indeed worthy of the place of honor! You are a beloved child of God and that is what counts!!

True humility says, 'I am enough, you are enough. I am worthy, you are worthy. I am a beloved and blessed child of God and you are a beloved and blessed child of God.' This is a call to intentionally strive for equity and access. It is a call to practice love of self AND of neighbor - not love of self OR love of neighbor. How can the Spirit in me honor and care for the Spirit in you if we are locked in an ego driven competition? This is a call for true brotherhood and sisterhood across all the seen and unseen divides - in status, in giftedness, in all our diversity, and in all our oneness. This is the model laid out by the first century church where all resources were shared, all prayed together, ate together, worshiped together, and all needs were met.

Identifying our privilege can take a willingness to be vulnerable, especially when we are blind and it is unconscious. When told to 'check your privilege' it can be used as a barb to expose our blind spots - all of a sudden the "I am dumb, stupid, and wrong" button gets pushed! This can trigger shame. It can trigger our deepest fear - that we are unacceptable, unwanted, unlovable! We can feel attacked, embarrassed, or guilty. Any one of these emotional states does nothing to promote healing and justice for all involved.

'Checking your privilege' is actually an invitation to become more aware, to recognize our blind spots and assumptions. In truth, checking our privilege is our responsibility and one of the most loving and life-giving things we can do - for ourselves and for our neighbor.

Identifying our privilege is recognizing and claiming our capabilities, gifts, talents, and station in the community - not so we can laud it over someone else like those scrambling for the best seats at the banquet, but so we can honestly and with humility leverage it for the lifting up of those who don't enjoy the same privileges. This is what our faith asks of us. This is what the teachings of Jesus call us to be about. This is the foundational scripture Church of the Open Door professes. "Let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding." Romans 14:19

Leveraging our privilege - it is about claiming and using our personal and collective power, it is about advocacy, it is about being aware of what we have been given - by God - our talents, our capabilities, our personal giftedness - and by society (as unequal and as unearned as these may be) -our skin color, our sexual orientation, our physical abilities, our legal status, our ability to understand community norms, and language, and the like.

To me advocacy and leveraging my privilege is about fully knowing my true self, a beloved child of God, possessing certain God-given gifts and talents, as well as society's granting of privileges so I can stand in solidarity with folks who don't have what I have. It is about claiming and utilizing the power I possess to affect and promote the deconstruction of systems of oppression. It is about giving respect and honor to those sitting on the margins, hungry, lost, and poor.

Leveraging our privilege requires sacrifice - of time, of money, of expertise, of status, sometimes even our freedom! Jesus is the ultimate model for this kind of sacrificial leveraging of privilege. He came as a poor, displaced babe - his entire life was about serving, giving, and blessing others. His entire ministry was about teaching and practicing sacrificial love - all the way to the cross!

This is what loving God, self and neighbor is all about. This is the radical, amazing, life-giving love Jesus is talking about!

I will end with another word from Rev. Richard Rohr - “Once you fall into this ocean of love, you realize that divine love is loving in a quite unrestricted way. It’s a different kind of love, without qualifications, criteria, or judgments that are determined by the worthiness of the object. Our imperfect, human love is dependent upon our preferences. If we find someone attractive, nonthreatening, belonging to our race and our religion, and with a compatible temperament, we say, “I love you.” Well, as Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:32).

Like Jesus, we are to love others not because of who they are, but because of who we are—all and equally the beloved of God.”

Amen