

Last week on our day off Kendyll & I visited Newport, R.I. We enjoyed the sights, the sounds and, of course, the mansions. In case you don't know, the mansions of Newport are marvels of American history. About 10 of them are still open for tours - and they're amazing; literal monuments to America's upper crust during the Gilded Age, that period between the Civil War and the First World War when America was on its way to becoming the richest and most powerful nation on earth.

From the 1860's to the 1920's, Newport was the playground for America's elite; the "wealthiest families, including the Vanderbilts, the Astors and the Morgans."¹ All the barons & tycoons summered there, with "cottages" that could entertain 300, 400, even 600 guests at a time with all-night banquets. sweeping ballrooms, "Glittering ... gold and crystal"² - even exotic animals like swans in fountains, or chimpanzees sipping champagne. [I would have paid to see that!]

The social Queen of Newport for many years was a woman named Caroline Astor. Her, "guest lists [were famous; the most coveted marker of social status. Her lists] were limited to four hundred, and Mrs. Astor made it clear that only 'worthwhile' people were invited. [According to one account] The Astor parties were dreadfully dull, but no one cared. [Because all the 'worthwhile' people were there.] The socialites of the Gilded Age were desperate to be among the chosen

¹ <http://www.newport-discovery-guide.com/newport-mansions.html>

² <https://newengland.com/today/travel/rhode-island/newport-mansions/>

‘Four Hundred.’ Those who made the [list] were thrilled; those who missed out were [shamed].” Making the list of Caroline Astor was just too important not to care.³

Times have changed. Today those mansions won't improve anyone's status. They're tourist attractions; monuments to an age gone by. But one of the fascinating things is how many people still visit these mansions today. A full century after the Gilded Age came crashing to an end, thousands upon thousands of visitors (like me) still visit these mansions every year. I love it. Bc they still have power; power to attract us with beauty & splendor; maybe even the power of a few daydreams about what it would be like to live there and to know that we really belonged with the “chosen” elite.

From the Gospel: “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,” (Lk. 14.1). Today's Gospel is a story about knowing who belongs with the chosen elite. It's not a story about ballrooms of gold & crystal. It's about who belongs in the people of God. And every word at the beginning of the story is meant to cue us in: Jesus, House, Leader, Pharisee, Meal, & Sabbath. Every word counts. Because this story is about where Jesus belongs on their social scale.

First, he's invited to a *house* - and not just any house, but the house of a

³ “Mrs, Astor and the ‘Four Hundred’” by Stephen Currie from *Cobblestone* (April, 2000)

leader, and a leader of the *Pharisees*. Pharisees are the ones who controlled the guest lists you wanted to be on. Not because they were kings or politicians. It's because Pharisees set the social standard when it came to "worthwhile" people in God's Kingdom. That's power. And if you weren't "chosen" by the Pharisees - if you weren't on their list - they could make sure that you were socially shamed.

So in today's story when Jesus is invited to the house of a leader of the Pharisees for a meal on the sabbath - every word counts. Every word is meant to introduce a story about where Jesus belongs. Every word is meant to cue in about whether he's a "worthwhile" person on their list. But what begins as a story about worthwhile people, turns into a parable where the only worthwhile people are the ones who take the lowest place.

Here's how it works. This isn't the first time that Jesus joins the Pharisees for a meal. In Luke's Gospel, it's the third time one of the Pharisees invites Jesus to come over. The first two meals begin by telling us that Jesus "took his place at the table," (Lk. 7.36; 11.37). He took his place. Then, each of those stories show us that Jesus didn't behave like someone who knew "his place." At one meal he doesn't ritually clean himself (Lk. 11). At another meal, he allows an unclean woman to clean him (Lk. 7) - it's a contradiction in terms. A Pharisee even complains that Jesus is insulting them by not acknowledging his place (Lk. 11).

That's what happens in the first two stories. Jesus, a powerful prophet in word & deed, is causing all kinds of confusion about his place. But today there's

no mention about “his place.” Instead, Jesus is watching all of *them* and seeing *them* fight for their own place (Lk. 14.7). Because remember it isn't just any meal. It's a meal for the social elite. And the place of honor is defined by the ones who sit nearest the host. The irony is that even though the Pharisees think they're watching Jesus (Lk. 14.1), he's already turned the table - so to speak - by watching them (14.7). And here's what he says: “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” (Lk. 14.11).

You see, Jesus agrees with the Pharisees that being a “worthwhile” person in God's Kingdom has everything to do with our social customs like diet & meals & sabbath. But the Pharisees have it completely upside down. Bc “Sabbath is [supposed to be] the time [we] set aside to do nothing so that we can receive everything, [it's the time we] set aside our anxious attempts to make ourselves [important].”⁴ But instead of that; instead of using sabbath as a gift; instead of using their common meal as a sign of their common life,⁵ the Pharisees are taking “advantage of one another.” They're trying to get ahead. They're promoting their own interest instead of God's interest. Instead of celebrating sabbath, “They were betraying the Sabbath in the very [name] of ‘protecting’ it.”⁶

And here's the catch: we all do the same thing. Sooner or later, we all put our own interest ahead of God's interest. Sooner or later, we all put our own

⁴ Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, p.83

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org>

⁶ Ibid.

interest at the center of our lives - whether it's our own pleasure, power, or prestige. But whatever else we put at the center of our lives the end result is always the same. If we're not loving God & our neighbor at the center of our lives, then eventually we become less human. That's always the end result. The more we put our selves at the center of our lives the less human we become. Or, as we hear from the wisdom of Sirach, "the beginning of pride is sin," (Sir. 10.13).

The reason we become less human whenever we put our selves at the center of our lives is because we're made in the image of God. And the God of our faith is a God who surrenders everything; who endures anything to love, to care, and to restore the least, the lost, and the lowly. And whenever we forget that we become less human.

It's really hard. It's really hard not to focus on getting ahead or protecting our turf. After all, if we don't look out for ourselves, who will? It's a big world. And sometimes it's not just individuals but entire families, neighborhoods, or nations that suffer & fall through the cracks. If we don't look out for ourselves, then who will?

But then we realize that ancient Israel was no different. Jesus' homeland was nothing more than a patch of desert; a stomping ground for empires & armies. King Herod slaughtered a village of infants just to protect his position (Matt. 2.16-18). Pontius Pilate shed the blood of pilgrims to just preserve his power (Luke 13.1). If there was any place in the ancient world that might have been justified to

fight for it's own turf, then ancient Israel was the place.

But Jesus said: no. He said that wouldn't do. Because love & humility, sacrifice & hospitality are *always* the status markers in God's Kingdom. We hear it today in Hebrews: *Let love continue. Don't neglect hospitality, for by doing that some have entertained angels*, (Heb. 13.1-2). Hospitality & sacrifice, love & humility are always the marks of any "worthwhile" people in God's Kingdom. And the moment we put anything else at the center of our lives is the moment we become less human.

In the end, when you get right down to it, the death & resurrection of Jesus is God's way of showing us this truth. It's God's way of showing us that the deepest truth of the world has nothing to do with defending our turf or fighting for a better seat. The deepest truth of creation has everything to do with sacrifice & hospitality, love & humility. That's the deepest truth of the cross & resurrection. That's what we mean when we say: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," (Heb. 13.8). We mean that self-giving love & humility like Jesus revealed on the cross is the truth that's always been at the heart of creation. Our lives are about following that truth, both now & in the age to come.

These days, following Jesus may not improve anyone's social status. But it's fascinating how many of us still follow him today. 2,000 years after his death & resurrection, billions of us are still attracted to the power & the splendor of his life. And today he tells us that if we really want to know what it's like to belong with

the chosen elite in God's Kingdom, then we're invited to take the lowest seat and to throw banquets for the poor & the crippled, the blind & the lame. We're invited to share our lives fearlessly as a gift. Do it, he says, *And you will be blessed, because even if no one else can repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous* (Lk. 14.14). *Amen.*