

COUNTING BLESSINGS NOT PROBLEMS

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

Jesus' words in our Gospel reading today probably don't mean all that much in our culture. They seem just polite advice in good social manners, and we may not even think much of it. But to his first century hearers living in an honour-shame culture that was intensely sensitive to issues of status and recognition, it would have seemed rather remarkable, and ultimately offensive.

I say "ultimately" because the problem Jesus names was acute. There were few things that would have been more humiliating than to have the host ask you to move to a lower position in the social gathering. You would feel like you had been named an upstart, someone who thought too much of him or herself, one who didn't know his/her place, and the physical act of moving lower would mirror the drop in your prestige and social capital. Thus, at first blush, anyway, his advice makes sense and, indeed, repeats similar counsel found elsewhere. As I write this I remember friends of mine were helping their daughter arrange her wedding and the bride's uncle (her Father's brother) happen to call in while they were doing the seating plan for the Reception. The uncle was horrified when he saw where he and his wife had been placed. He said it was insult to be seated so far away from the main table and unless he was moved closer he wouldn't attend. He ultimately calmed down and sat where he was placed.

I think we are experiencing something similar with the mobile phone. They do so much more than make and receive calls. In them we have the world at our fingertips and we can't seem to do without them. They go off at the most inappropriate times: during weddings and funerals, meetings and in church. Why do we think we are so important that we must be accessible at every single moment of the day? Why can't we wait for an appropriate time to check messages or read emails? Why does it have to be done during the eulogy?

But here Jesus doesn't stop with merely offering advice on social etiquette. He continues by admonishing his listeners not to take the social payoff or reward of their invitations and hospitality. Indeed, Jesus says they should not invite to dinner those who already respect them or who are in a position to reward their hospitality or who would invite them back in return, but rather to invite the outcast – the poor, the sick, the socially undesirable and more.

And I think he means it! That is, Jesus' whole life centred on inviting into the presence of God those who neither expect nor deserve such an invitation. And

he expects us to do the same. He expects us to stop counting the costs, benefits, and rewards of our actions and live from a sense of abundance and blessing.

Counting. It's so omnipresent in our lives that we almost forget it exists even as it exacts a tremendous toll on us. Whether we are counting the amount in our bank accounts, or the opinions of our neighbours on what we wear or do, we are continually counting. Why? Because we live with the sure conviction that there is not enough. Not enough money, time, prestige, resources, recognition, you name it. And that conviction seems sure, even

unquestionable, because so much in our culture- and particularly the advertisements we're relentlessly subjected to – tell us there isn't.

But what if there was? What if there was enough and more than enough to go around? What difference would that make to our own peace of mind and the way we treated others? What if we saw others not as competitors for scarce resources but as partners, even siblings, commissioned by God to distribute the riches of God's goodness and grace?

When I was a child on Christmas morning one of us would be designated "Santa's Helper". Dad would read out who a gift was to and from. The "Helper" would then distribute the gift. At first that was not seen as much of a privilege because it meant you didn't get to open your gifts til last but as we grew older we enjoyed it more and more because there was something so very joyful in seeing everyone's delight in receiving their gifts. Then you receiving all yours together out of a sense of wonderful abundance.

And that's what Jesus is inviting here. To stop counting and start giving and blessing. My theology of church is not to be envious of the bigger church down the road or the church with more young people but be thankful for the blessings we have here. This is the group of people God has brought together for this moment. We have a mission and ministry. It may be smaller but that doesn't mean we are less impactful on the lives that are touched by our Ministries. We are blessed and we are to be a blessing to others. It may be the joy brought to lonely lives by hymn singing in a Nursing Home or raising money for homeless families or by offering social opportunities to people who might not get out of their houses for anything else.

We can grumble, even blame God for what we do not have or we can be thankful for the opportunities we do have and the lives we do touch. One

young boy only had two small fish and five bread rolls but used rightly it fed 5,000 people. What do you have? What do we have? Used rightly we can do so much more than we can imagine.

Let us stop counting the things in our lives and live out of the abundance of what we do have. It may not seem much but in the right hands, used it the right way it can be a blessing, we can be a blessing in ways beyond our imaging. AMEN.
