

“Being God’s Invitation”

Rev. Tom Steffen

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Proverbs 26:6-7 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14

The readings for today offer two invitations. The first invites us to work at being humble, not haughty. It is better to wait, if we can, wait to be discovered, instead of pushing our way to the front to be seen by others. Sure, it’s good to “have some pride in what we do.” I was taught this, and I still shine my shoes and clean my fingernails. Don’t you? But today’s readings invite us to stop short of “taking” too much pride, lest we become arrogant. Now, you may be thinking, “I wonder if he’s referring to the arrogance that can fill a *white* house.” Well, I am worrying about that house, and I’m also worried about any colored house, including yours and mine, and what fills townhouses and condos. Having enough but not taking too much *pride* is tricky.

You have no doubt heard the phrase, “Pride goeth before the fall.” It is a line from Proverbs, chapter 16. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase puts it this way: “First pride, then the crash—the bigger the ego, the harder the fall.” Why? Simply because arrogance destroys, can even destroy a nation, I suspect. And there are other warnings in Proverbs. In chapter 13, verse 10, we are told that “arrogance yields nothing but strife,” because if we glorify ourselves at the expense of others we end up ruining every relationship. So it is not surprising that in Proverbs 16, verse 5, that we read that God finds over-inflated egos detestable. “Every haughty person,” it says bluntly, “is an abomination to the Lord.” In the Talmud, the ancient commentary on the Torah, one writer imagines God saying: “If you are haughty—you and I cannot dwell in the same world.” (BT, Sotah 5a) Mark Twain put it slightly different: “a self-made man is like a self-laid egg.” What I suspect he was suggesting is that arrogance is both presumptuous and necessarily false.

But today’s readings offer not only an invitation to avoid arrogance; they offer an invitation to the table. The reading from St. Luke’s narrative, based on Proverbs 26:6-7, places Jesus at the dinner table of a leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath, no less. Arriving early, he sits and watches as his fellow guests scramble for places of honor around the table. I can imagine a little jostling, maybe the putting on an “air” or two of importance, working to sit nearest the host. And the drama leads to the telling of a parable, one about being invited to a wedding reception and deliberately choosing to sit farthest from the host. Why? So that the host can notice us, and invite us to come closer. Does this conclusion surprise you? If not, how about what Jesus says next? While looking at the Pharisee, no doubt, Jesus suggests that when we give a luncheon or dinner to not only include those who can return the favor. Jesus says bluntly, also “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”

One commentator says that Jesus’ words are meant to start a revolution concerning our “table manners.” She writes: “God, the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values... knows that there is no end to the miserable human game of who is “in” and who is “out,” and... God knows, too, that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation.” (Debie Thomas, “Journey with Jesus”)

So, God is calling us to the table, this table. Yes. And not just us; God calls everybody and everybody means every body. Why? Because we all need to be invited, we all need to hear the invitation for ourselves, I think. The pompous, proud, pushy tend not to get the invitation, because they always jump the gun and invite themselves, I guess. And sadly, if we are too downcast, too down and out, too depressed, well, we don't really feel worthy enough to be invited, and so we never really hear the invitation either. Is there anything we can do? Well, perhaps, Steve Garnass-Holmes' reflection this week gets it right. Maybe the best thing to do is try to *be the invitation*, and as we practice being/living the invitation for others to hear we, too, will hear it for ourselves.

“Make of your life a welcome home,” he writes. “Make your heart a buffet of goodness. Make yourself a front porch, wide, two chairs, only one step up. Think of yourself as a free sample, a rocking chair, a bench by a lake. People need a place to belong, to matter, to receive without question. Round up all your furniture of love and respect, all your heirlooms of special treatment, and put them out on the curb. Go ahead and make a sign that says—FREE. It's not about airing your laundry, or “being yourself.” It's about letting them do that. After all, you live in God's house, who has given you the run of the place.” Steve Garnass-Holmes