

Sunday, 28 August 2016

Luke 14- humility and hospitality



Luke 14:1, 7-14

There is a story about a university professor who went to visit a Zen master to learn about Zen Buddhism. The master served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the tea overflow until he could no longer restrain himself, "It is full. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," the master said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

The professor was full of himself. In a similar way, the Pharisees were full of themselves. In Zen Buddhism they teach that there is no such thing as the "self". There is no soul. There is no person, ultimately. In Christianity, the teaching is self-forgetfulness. There is a self, but the self is not the focus. The focus is to be other-focused- towards God and neighbour. The Pharisees were self-focused.

Jesus saw the Pharisees choosing their places at the table according to how important they thought they were and he says,

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest

place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.” (14:8-10)

On one level Jesus is just speaking about good manners in a society that was constantly ranking one another. In the first century, there was this constant sort of social ranking. For example, there was a religious sect at Qumran (who are believed to have written the Dead Sea Scrolls). They were known to annually rank each member of the community according to the worthiness of each person.[\[1\]](#) ... Imagine each year you are given a number that ranks your worthiness as a member of this church. “You’re 1, well done. And, you’re number 50, you better start trying a bit harder, you’re at the bottom of the pile. You’re 10. You’re 5.” “Oh, you moved up 3 ranks this year, keep up the good work”. ...

You might remember in Luke 9 and again in chapter 22 the Disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. It seems childish. But they were just doing out loud what we tend to do quietly in our heads. We have learned not to be so obvious (probably because of the effects of the teachings of Jesus on our culture). We sometimes rank on the basis of money, or how prestigious a job they have, how beautiful they are, maybe what family they come from, religion, volunteer work, gender, ethnicity, education, etc. We might not even realize we are doing it. ... We might see how strong this instinct is in us by how much time we are willing to give to listen to a person, or how willing we are to be interrupted when we are in conversation with this person. Maybe even how willing we are to correct a person, or offend a person. Our tone of voice can change. Our eye contact will change. Have you ever met someone at an event and they were constantly looking over your shoulder for someone more important than you they can go talk to? Compare the way you might treat a person asking you for spare change, to a family member, then to meeting one of your heroes. How willing are you to be interrupted when

you are being asked for change compared to talking with a hero. We do this ranking very subtly- we don't even realize we are doing it.

So on one level, Jesus is teaching good manners in a society where people were overtly and constantly ranking each other. Don't think of yourself as more important than you ought. And when in doubt, take the less important position.

Actually Jesus is really just restating Proverbs 25:6-7 which says, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

On another level I think he is talking about something like what the Zen master was talking about. If you are full of yourself no more tea can go in. If you are full of your self God is less able to teach you or use you for His Kingdom. This was the main problem with the Pharisees. They thought they knew all the answers. They wanted Jesus to behave and fit into their understanding of how the world worked. They wanted him to fit into their box. They weren't willing to humble themselves to be able to see truly what Jesus was teaching and how he turned everything upside down.

You might remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18 (v10-14)- "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other." ... In a sense, the tax collector standing before God knew he brought nothing. He was emptied of himself. He knew God owed him nothing and so he stood before God with empty hands. God

was able to fill his empty hands with forgiveness and mercy. ... The Pharisee's hands were full of his own accomplishments. Hands that are full cannot be filled. Jesus' way of saying this is, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11).

Jesus pushes this a bit further. In the ancient world towns were smaller and people tended to stay in the same town for generations, and so everyone sort of knew everyone. You knew who the important people in town were and you knew who the not so important people in town were. When you had a dinner party you usually invited people about as important as you, or if you were honoured, those who were more important than you might grace you with their presence. Jesus says, "do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:12-13). He's not saying never have your friends or family over. He's again pointing to this instinct to rank each other. He's noticing the tendency to leave out those who were considered less important. When Jesus spoke about the poor, crippled, lame, and blind, those who were listening all had faces and names come to mind. Jesus even says a greater reward comes from inviting those the world thinks of as less important because they often can't pay you back by inviting you for dinner. Instead, your reward will come from heaven.

Jesus is not necessarily wanting us to just grit out teeth and have dinner parties with people we would rather not be around. Jesus is wanting us to break our pride that ranks people into these different categories in comparison to ourselves. To Jesus there is just one category- a person made in the image of God, a sinner. Those who are invited to the heavenly banquet are people made in the image of God, who are also sinners. That is the category he is inviting us to use as we encounter people.

The sin we are talking about that has this tendency to rank people, and especially to try to think of ourselves as being more important than other people is good old fashioned pride. It has been called the root sin from which all other sin comes. We can have a life full of good deeds, but have that root firmly entrenched in our lives. That was the case with the Pharisees. The Catholic Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “If my own eternal salvation were conditioned upon saving the soul of one self-wise man who prided himself on his learning, or one hundred of the most morally corrupt men and women of the streets, I should choose the easier task of converting the hundred. Nothing in all the world is more difficult to conquer in all the world than intellectual pride. If battleships could be lined with it instead of with armor, no shell could ever pierce them.”[\[2\]](#)

Kenosis is a Greek word that means “emptiness”. It is used in Philippians 2 to talk about Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [or exploited], but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:6-10). Jesus humbled himself- he emptied himself in a way that we can’t even imagine. What does it mean for the Son of God to take on human flesh- to lay as a baby in an animal’s feeding trough, and to allow Himself to be killed on a cross? Jesus emptied himself so that he could be filled with grace and used to bring about salvation. He is our example. We humble ourselves- we empty ourselves- and by doing so God may exalt us. We come to God with empty hands, hoping that God might fill them.