

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Today's teaching from Jesus is beautiful, but also a little unfortunate—susceptible to overthinking. It's a classic reversal: humble yourself and you will be exalted by God. Issue invitations to those who can't repay you, and God will repay you at the resurrection of the righteous. The problem is obvious, right? Humbling yourself is just another way to maintain status. I ostentatiously put myself at the bottom of the table, and then I blush and gesture dismissively when the host insists that I move up to a place of higher status until they're forced to come down and accompany me to my new seat. Instead of a genuine blow against self-importance, Jesus' teaching becomes a strategy to establish greater self-importance. One thinks of Dickens' villainous character Uriah Heep, whose strategy for power is to proclaim his humility:

"I am well aware that I am the umblest person going," said Uriah Heep modestly, "let the other be where he may. My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in an umble abode, Master Copperfield, but have much to be thankful for. My father's former calling was umble; he was a sexton."

That cannot be what Jesus intended. He was too smart for that. And he's not the only one. An early Sufi saint, Rabia of Bosra, is reputed to have gone through the streets with a flaming torch and a bucket of water, saying that the torch was to burn down paradise and the bucket to put out the flames of hell, so that we would love God for Godself alone, not from fear of hell or for the reward of paradise. True wisdom would be to take the lowest seat at the table, or to invite those who can't reciprocate, out of an abundance of gratitude for all that God has given, out of appreciation for the value of one's neighbors, rather than out of hope for a reward.

But this dangling of rewards in the story is intriguing, and I was tempted to explore it because I'm reading *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age* by Dale Allison, who teaches New Testament at Princeton Seminary. I'm not going down that rabbit hole today because it's too complicated for me yet, but I'm putting a pin in it. Dale Allison has had mystical experiences, and he thinks that more people than are willing to admit it also have, but that in our culture it's embarrassing or risky to admit it so people don't. So I guess, stay tuned. Anyway, for sure one thing that this mention of rewards points to is an assurance that God is just and, without expecting immediate payback, one can trust that one's generous participation in God's goodness will lead to more participation in God's goodness.

So let's get back to the way of living that Jesus is commending. Don't choose places of honor, or position yourself in a way that promotes your own importance. And offer hospitality without consideration of reciprocity. These seem to be social habits that at best take ego out of the equation. These are ways of being in the world that make it "not about me".

I've mentioned Simran Jeet Singh's new book, *The Light We Give*. It's a bit of a memoir, but it's also an exploration of Sikh teachings and spirituality. In one section, he talks about *seva* as a spiritual practice. *Seva*, he says, is worshiping with our hands, or, as Abraham Joshua Heschel said of marching with Dr. King in Selma, praying with our feet. *Seva* is service inspired by love. The regular practice of *langar*—distributing food to others before sitting down to eat—happens every time they visit the *gurdwara*, the house of worship. It's what Jesus is talking about.

Singh's wife is a doctor, and he says that when the pandemic started he admired the heroic efforts of health care workers, including her, but felt increasingly uncomfortable with his

own contributions. “I was used to being on the front lines of activism and addressing urgent needs, whether guiding responses to hate crimes or advocating for better policies. Now I was trapped at home with little to contribute. . . . She was doing everything in her power to keep sick people from dying, while I spent my days constructing unicorn-princess castles and riding scooters with our babies.”ⁱ

He felt sharper guilt every day until he came across a note he’d scrawled in the margin of a lesson he’d given to high school students on racial justice. “Don’t confuse activity for activism.” It reminded him that his guilt had less to do with what he was *doing* than how he was *thinking*. He was *thinking* that being on the ground and in the middle of everything was the best way to make change. In this case he was off to the side, doing important but invisible work by caring for their children and maintaining social distance in order not to spread disease. Being off to the side felt unimportant—and when he realized that, he also realized that in other justice struggles he’d overlooked and forgotten people who played important but invisible roles. His outlook had become self-centered and self-serving, he says, even though he did not consciously believe that the invisible work was less important. He’d just sort of slid into an unconscious bias because *he* tended to be up front and visible.

That right there seems like an important insight, not because he’d been literally claiming greater honor for himself than for supporting actors, but because it showed him how he’d unconsciously been putting himself into the center of the world. He knows he’s not the center of the world, but being visible and listened to makes you feel like you are, and this was a moment when he recognized that he believed one thing but acted like another thing. In actual fact, the person who takes care of the small children is utterly necessary to the doctor’s

disease-fighting work. AND taking care of small children is inherently important and valuable. So in the metaphor of Jesus' teaching, Singh had been sort of assuming that the lower end of the table was where supporting players belonged, and he found it humiliating to be placed there. He felt like he should be one of the people whose work would put you at the head of the table. But *Jesus* would put the childcare providers up near the head of the table, right there with the doctors.

As he continues to unpack this experience, he discerns that he had let his own desire to feel useful supersede what others actually needed. They needed him to keep physical distance, and he did, but it felt worthless to him. He says that while we need to evaluate our activism in terms of outcomes and effectiveness, but we must also evaluate it in terms of our intentions and processes. "Without rightful intention, our efforts can make us more self-centered rather than less. . . . a model of engagement that accounts for what we accomplish *and* what's on the inside can take us toward wholeness and justice rather than away from it; such a paradigm would enable us to transform the world around us while also transforming us from the inside. According to Guru Amardas, sincerity—not outcomes—is the ultimate gauge of our efforts: *Seva, consciousness, and devotion are true when we eliminate selfishness within.*" (p. 265)

I find that so helpful. It disentangles love and service from ego, which I think Jesus is getting at when he advises people to avoid self-glorification and creating social debts that can be repaid. Singh's reflection points out to us how to avoid inadvertently making even our discipleship all about us. And it actually reshapes the table from one with an upper and a lower end to maybe more of a round table, where the childcare provider's contribution is as valuable as the doctor's contribution.

In a culture defined by the Roman system of patronage, Jesus was urging his listeners to disregard patronage entirely, which was probably like trying to disregard the presence of salt in the food you're eating. It was that endemic. Our culture today is not one of patronage but maybe of meritocracy: you get what you deserve, and whatever you lack is because you haven't earned it. Simran Singh is providing us a bridge from Jesus' time to our own time by introducing the concept of *seva*, which I would contend is exactly what Jesus was teaching. Act from love and disregard whatever the culture tells you about people's value, including your own. Our worth is not determined by what we do. Our worth is inherent and cannot be diminished because God makes us. From that conviction, we too can be like Rabia Bosra, loving God for God's self rather than out of fear of hell or desire for paradise.

Let us pray:

God, Your grace reaches out to all of us.
You call us to live as citizens of heaven,
working together with one heart and mind.
Strengthen us to live in a manner worthy
of the Good News we have received,
offering our lives in service of Your kingdom,
where the last are first, and the first are last,
and there is grace enough for all.

ⁱ Simran Jeet Singh, *The Light We Give*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2022, p. 262.