

The Divine Pecking Order

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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It's a good thing for me that you are not beholden to the finer points of the Old Testament Law, because if you were, I'd be unfit to serve as your pastor/minister/priest. You may not know what is the favorite Biblical passage of a majority of teenaged boys participating in nice, suburban Confirmation classes, but I do: It is Leviticus 21:18-20. "For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease, or scabs, or crushed testicles." Fourteen year olds love to huddle together around their Bibles, reading passages like this and looking for others like them, in part because they can suddenly say out loud in church certain kinds of words which will get them into trouble when uttered almost anywhere outside of their health education class.

If the truth be told, I think they look for these kinds of passages for two additional, and interrelated, reasons. The first is to do what teenagers seem to be experts at doing, that is, to create an "in group" and an "out group," to reinforce their ideas that there is a "cool" group and a "loser" group, obvious physical differences being a key defining feature of those in the latter category of "loser." But the other reason they do it, I think, is actually to see whether they themselves

measure up, to see if they have any kind of physical attribute which would disqualify them from the social acceptability they crave. Generally, this is safe reading because the lists read are not full of traits widely characteristic of suburban teenaged boys, and because that age group is not generally given to the kind of reflection which might extend the idea of these prohibitions to less obvious physical differences, or to use the Biblical word, “blemishes,” or to their emotional or psychic counterparts. If they did reflect a little more deeply, they might realize that there is no one without some kind of “blemish,” something which prevents them from being perfect, and which therefore disqualifies them from being God. But as we know, most teenaged boys think themselves invulnerable and invincible, God-like characteristics if ever there were some.

You are by now probably wondering which of my legs is longer, or whether I have scabs you just can't see, as I began by observing that in some circles I could be seen as unfit for religious duty. It is true that my right calf is slightly larger around than my left calf, but the real reason I probably would have been disqualified in days of old is because I am afflicted with what are generically called “tics,” involuntary muscle contractions that typically manifest themselves in arms, legs, and sometimes face. For those of you who are familiar with Tourette's syndrome, tics are a very mild cousin of that more famous affliction. When I was a scrawny fifth-grader, my tics presented themselves most acutely in my face and were therefore easily observable, and mimicable and useful for separating the

“cool” group from the “loser” group. Although it was not an easy time in my life, it was a useful one for it opened my eyes at perhaps a younger age than my peers to the fact that each of us has something which marks us as physically imperfect (as if there really were such a thing as the “perfect” human being). Some people have birthmarks, others need glasses, others have a curvature of the spine, or allergies, or dyslexia. The truth behind all the taunting that I received for my obvious difference, was the denial, or at least a silence and a hiding, of the ways in which each of my tormentors was less than perfect.

What my peers were trying to create, of course, was a playground pecking order. For those for whom the term “pecking order” may be unfamiliar, it refers to the internal social dynamics of chickens and other domesticated birds to determine a ranking of importance and benefits. Chickens “peck” one another with their beaks as a means of dominance and so the term pecking order has been applied to describe who pecks and who gets pecked. There is a top chicken and a bottom chicken and lots of chickens in between and the higher up you are, the more you do the pecking, and the less you get pecked. If you’ve ever been pecked by a chicken, or worse, by a goose (which can break your arm), you know it is not a pleasant experience and thus it behooves lower ranked chickens to try to move up in the pecking order, although at the expense of other chickens. A playground pecking order, such as school children seek to establish on the basis of such things as physical differences, involves the same dynamics, but of course does not stop after

elementary school and exists in almost every area of society, including religion, a fact not lost on Jesus while he is dining at the home of a leader of the Pharisees, a group of people for whom the idea of the pecking order had been raised to a fine art. The party situation Jesus describes about the honor involved in being seated closest to the host was one such manifestation of a first century pecking order. The pecking would have been in the form of making sure the people below you knew they were beneath you and why, not only during the party, but also before and after. The high society page of the local newspaper is not a new invention, and it was as true then as it is now that it is not what you know but whom you know that matters.

There are at least two things noteworthy about Jesus' critique of the pecking order of his time. The first is that it doesn't stop with the upper echelon of the pecking order, the upper crust, so to speak. He goes on to address those who were so far down the scale that they weren't even invited to the party in the first place, the "poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." These folks didn't even have the chance to exhibit the lack of humility Jesus critiques in the others! They wouldn't have gotten through the door, much less to the table, and then to a position at the table higher than they ought to have been. Jesus is talking about people so far outside the thinking of the upper crust that they may as well not even have existed, and for that reason barely existed at all, living in streets and alleyways and tombs, begging and scrounging for food, waiting to crawl into pools of healing water but

having no one to help them. The Gospels are full of descriptions of such people, and how Jesus not only noticed them, but invited them to his own party, not at the position farthest from the host, but at the positions of honor nearest him.

The other noteworthy feature of Jesus' critique of the prevailing pecking order has to do with the ideas of value and reward which are just as much a part of your average social hierarchy as knowing where you stand. In essence, Jesus says to his host, "do not invite those who will be of value to you," those who will help you maintain or enhance your place in the pecking order, but rather those who seem to offer you no value at all. "You will be blessed," he says, precisely "*because* they cannot repay you," You see, the problem with pecking orders is not the intrinsic idea of social organization. People will always organize themselves; all of nature is organized and God organized it. The important question about pecking orders is how they are constructed and how they are maintained. Organizational structures become a problem when they are driven by things like the value which can be extracted from the people who comprise them. People are not commodities with value you can place on them or natural resources that can be mined or exploited, at least not in the Bible I read. You will not be surprised to hear that the pursuit of value, whether economic or emotional, is not the highest virtue in the Gospels and in fact, probably falls somewhere down the list close to greed and gluttony. The fact that we have a choice in how we construct our

pecking orders was, however, a surprising idea for those who had invited Jesus to their party.

At first glance, it would seem then that Jesus is laying out a divine pecking order that places the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind closer to the host than the Pharisees. Jesus is frequently turning societal notions of things like honor and shame, master and slave, clean and unclean on their heads and this sounds a lot like that. But to say here that Jesus is simply replacing those at the top with a different set of characters seems to miss the point of the party. Remember that the punchline is one of blessing: “you will be blessed...repaid at the day of the resurrection of the righteous.” And if this *one* is blessed by associating with those previously at the bottom of the pecking order, how much greater the blessing when all attend the party together no matter where they stand in somebody’s pecking order! If Jesus has turned a notion on its head, it would seem to be the one that suggests that there is really any difference between any of us that should cause us to try to create a social hierarchy that would value one person over another. The key feature of the divine pecking order is that there is no pecking at all because there is nothing to be gained from it, and everything to be lost. You see, the only value that matters is the value that God places on us, a value worthless in the currency of our daily pecking orders. Hidden behind the carefully cultivated facade of the daily pecking order is the truth is that each of us is in the same barrel of imperfection, each of us “blemished” in one form or another, each of us bearing

wounds and scars, sins and shortcomings, social and spiritual disqualifiers for communion with God except for the grace of that same God. You see, there is not one of us who is not counted among the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Your poverty or your lameness or your blindness may not be exactly the same as mine, but it exists nonetheless whether you want to accept it or not. When Jesus tells the man to invite the usually uninvited characters to the party, it is not merely a piece of good advice, or a way to make his point. No, he is describing what God has already done for us in Christ, and calling us to go and do likewise. Like those in the story once excluded but now invited, we cannot repay our host, for love and grace are truly invaluable, but we can make sure that where we have a choice, we demonstrate the divine pecking order rather than the daily one, by being hosts whose hearts, hands, and voices throw one heck of a good party.

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is one such party, even if the church is a provisional host, a physical, though not spiritual, stand-ins for Christ himself. As we approach the table this night, let us remember that we come through no intrinsic value of our own but only that which God has imparted to us, that even though we come as flawed and wounded people in mind, body, and spirit, none of that matters to God. Let us realize that we have been invited through the grace of God, not because we have been such great hosts ourselves. And as we come, let us rejoice that we need not peck at one another to get our share of this bread and this cup, that

no one deserves it more or less than any of the rest of us, for God gives freely in the divine pecking order of the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.