

# Prey Together

Gospel of Luke 14:7-14

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*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely....When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, 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. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

*Gospel of Luke 14:7-14, NRSV*

*"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.... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

I wish I had paid more attention to Jesus when I first started working with horses. For there is no better place on earth to watch the wise words of this parable come alive, than in the company of horses. One on one, or in a pasture full...especially if you need fetch one of them. For the biological wiring of human beings and horses is diametrically opposed. Humans, like dogs and cats and all other meat eaters, are predators. Horses, however, are prey – as are all natural vegetarians. Their only relationship to the meat eating world is, well, that they are made of meat.

And so predators are naturally predisposed to an instinct for acquisition, while prey are predisposed to an instinct for survival. Unlike predators, prey animals are inherently governed by their vulnerabilities. For, their seat at the wedding banquet is more likely to be on the table than around the table.

The upshot of all of this is that if we want to have a relationship with a horse, if we want to be in relationship with a horse, we have to adopt a different way of thinking, in fact, we have to adopt a whole different view of the world. And we have to shift our understanding of where and how we stand in that new world view. And also what we want out of it. Because horses are motivated by very different kinds of carrots than are we.

Unlike power in the world of predators, power in the horse world is not grounded in acquisition. It has nothing to do with accomplishment. It is not about the accumulation of conquests or commendations or critical acclaim. Power in the horse world is rather about.....crowd control. That is, power in the world of prey animals is all about being able to move the other guy's feet. Period. That's it. The most powerful horse in the herd, the dominant mare, the head honcho, is the one that can get all of the others to move their feet. When a predator approaches, a horse will never choose to stand his ground and fight, a horse will always choose to flee. Prey animals are not designed to fight. They are rather designed for flight. And so the powerful one is the one who can make the others flee, that is, move their feet.

And so, if you ever need to fetch a mare from out in the pasture, even if she's all alone, even if she knows you well and loves you dearly, even if she knows that what's in store for her might well be enjoyable, it will be your very lucky day if you can march straight up to her and snap on her lead rope without any incident. More likely, you will schlep all the way across the pasture, and just as you approach her (and she will be watching you with keen intuition), just as you are feeling confident that she is waiting patiently for your arrival, she will sense your confidence and your intention to possess her (even if your intentions are good and your possession is temporary), and she will bolt. She will high-tail-it in the other direction. And at an amazingly high speed.

And there you will stand. Alone with your lead rope. At this point, you can do one of two things. Either, you can chase her around the field until you drop from exhaustion or die of old age. This will well establish the horse as the powerhouse in this situation. For she will have accomplished the task of getting you to move your feet in hot pursuit of her. This is the way that prey overpower predators, they run them into the ground, as it were. And at first, you will likely be tempted to fall into this trap, you are after all, a bonafide predator.

But the better option is to turn your back on her. Disengage your pursuit. Release her from your assumption and intention of dominance, which, incidentally, your frustration will inform you, you clearly have no right to assume. Turn your back to her and walk quietly away, way away, away until you have reached the appropriate distance from her; the distance that says in no uncertain terms, I am not a threat to you, I do not want to conquer you, I am not the dominant one, I am not exalting myself any further, I am rather humbly waiting....waiting without making any demands; waiting for you to come to me. And, saints be praised, eventually she will. Almost every time. And *this* is when, and only when, you will truly be empowered in this relationship.

*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Likewise, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus offers us a parable that speaks to the way we see ourselves in this world, the way we *position* ourselves, if you were. It is not about what we must do or not do. It is not about what we must believe or not believe. It is not about what we have or do not have. It is about how and where we choose to sit or stand in relation to others....in *relation* to others.

This parable may seem somewhat trite and simple at first glance. It seems to offer a lesson in what is already a commonsense wisdom of etiquette, even in the ancient world, especially in the ancient world. This seems a bit of advice that is already in keeping with the cultural norms of acceptable and honorable behavior. But the fact that it is a *parable* suggests that there is a second meaning, or a meaning happening to the side of the apparent meaning, as the word "parable" literally means in the Greek.

And when we look a bit closer, we see that the *active* commands that Jesus instructs - when you are invited *do not do this*...in case someone sits down, *do give give them that* - these *active* commands are juxtaposed with *passive* results - you will be humbled....you will be exalted....you will be blessed. The grammatical inference is that there is no direct cause and effect between our behavior and our standing in the kingdom of God. Jesus implies that we are to actively live in a certain frame of mind, in a certain way - but living in that "right" way will not buy us heaven any more than wearing sweet perfume will buy us love. We are not in control of our standing in God's kingdom....God is. We cannot bless or exalt our own selves....only God can. All we can do in this life, in fact, all we are called to do in this life, is to position ourselves - humbly, mindfully, compassionately in the...herd. This passage is not about what we have or accomplish, but rather about how and where we choose to stand in God's creation. Do we choose privilege or proximity? Do we choose status or service? Do we choose comfort or compassion?

I have just finished a summer stint as a chaplain at camp that offer horse back riding. This is the fifth summer in a row that I have worked with kids (aged from 5 to 14) in various summer youth programs from Vacation Bible School to the Barbara Harris camp to Pony Club. And I suspect that this is the last summer that I will have the time and the freedom to do this kind of work with kids. And because passages like this morning's always make me want to compile "Jesus' Little Instruction Book" I am feeling like this holiday weekend before school starts is the time for me to share my learning from this wealth of experience. So here are a few things that I have learned:

Trust God, but hide the extra cookies and crayons.

Never take for granted health, happiness, or dry shoes and socks.

Walk gently on the earth but firmly in a formation of 13 year olds.

Always be kind, thoughtful and armed with a distracting knock knock joke.

Patience is a virtue because everything involving 5 year olds takes longer than you think.

When negotiating with a seven year old, speak slowly, think swiftly, and call for back up before you need it.

Blessed are the peacemakers and the parents who show up on time.

Remember that age may be a state of mind, but endurance is caffeine-dependant.

The 5 second rule is often followed by the time-out rule.

It is easier to fit a camel through the eye of a needle than to fit a six year old through any door he refuses to enter.

Always make sure that the first aid kit is close at hand, and well stocked with tootsie pops.

Remember that love may right all wrongs, but squelch a screaming child? Not so much.

When you realize you have made a mistake...sometimes you should keep your big mouth shut.

Remember to say please, thank you, and are you sure you don't need to potty before we get on the bus.

Do not be so open minded that your brains fall out.

When planning the liturgy, do not waste time waiting for inspiration, it will arrive with the kids.

Never use the words groovy and bling in the same sentence.

And finally, the seats of honor, are never, ever the one's you reserve in advance.

Between my work with kids and horses, I am learning that the seats of honor are hardly ever the ones we think we want. And they are never the ones that set us apart. They are rather the seats that put us in closest proximity with each other....who ever the other is. They are the seats that beckon us to mutual relationship rather than the ones that highlight our dominant stature. They are the seats that call us together, not the ones that tell us apart. And, unfortunately, they are not the cheap seats. And they are not the most comfortable seats. But they are indeed the most treasured seats.

They are the seats that invite us to sit with each other's vulnerabilities. They are the seats that invite us to sit and be prey together.

Amen.