

Who Matters?
Pentecost 14c
The Rev. Tricia de Beer

On first glance, if there was ever a gospel reading that invited a polite yawn, this might be it. I mean, Jesus comes off in this scene as a sort of a progressive Miss Manners. The first half seems to be common sense good advice – how much better to present yourself as humble and be invited higher than run the risk and embarrassment of appearing arrogant. The second half of the "parable" turns the focus of the etiquette conversation from guest to host and suggests that hosts should invite the outcast rather than the popular. Okay, so this is a little more progressive. Initially, I still felt like we should all say a collective "ho-hum" after hearing this reading and move on.

Except.... Except I think there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye. The ancient world was a society constructed on honor and shame. Your social position and political standing-- your worth, depended on who had more honor than you and who had less honor than you. If you associated with someone who had less, you lost honor. These things mattered more than just about anything else in Jesus' day. So he's not simply giving good advice. Rather, he's turning convention on its head. He's radically challenging the status quo. He's inciting something of a revolution. And for all these reasons he's inviting the death sentence he eventually gets.

Perhaps this sounds a long way from our contemporary experience but perhaps it's closer than we often realize. We humans are just insecure enough – and life is tumultuous enough – that there are few things we crave more in this topsy-turvy world than order,

and particularly a pecking order. We want to know where we stand, how we're doing, how we measure up. And given how small we feel – and, for that matter, really are – in comparison to the vast cosmos of which we are apart, more often than not, we seek that sense of order by comparing ourselves to others. This is why social pecking orders are so important.– It's rare that we're not more than a little invested in the pecking order of the various groups we're apart of.

And so here comes Jesus telling the guy who's invited him to his home for supper – how gauche! – and who also just happens to be a leader of the Pharisees, that his (and our) pecking orders aren't worth squat. More than that, Jesus is inviting this guy (and us) to defy the pecking order, to actually turn it on its head.

In this week's reading we stumble upon one of the primary reasons Jesus gets killed: he dares not only to stand outside the social order of his day; he dares not only to call that social order – and all social orders – into question; but he also says these things are not of God. Jesus proclaims here and throughout the gospel that in the kingdom of God, in God's dream for the world, there are no pecking orders. None. Zero. Zilch.

This past week I participated in an intensive orientation program for young people between the ages of 20-30 who are doing a year as interns in the Episcopal Service Corp created by our diocese called Life Together. We were talking about who matters and who doesn't in our society and what it means to become a community of faith that turns those social conventions on their head and step into God's dream for us. One day we

started by identifying some of our own experiences of mattering to someone, and some experiences of being marginalized. My mind went right back to high school. The people who mattered were those who were thin, beautiful, smart and rich, white and straight, able bodied and male. And these values were reinforced by the teachers and the school administration. “Girl of the Month” was the one had the best clothes and the most sophisticated appearance. I remember what it was like to be outside of that circle and my frenetic attempts to do anything necessary to get inside it. Much later in my life, I identified what it felt like to become someone who could not hear, and to find people just avoiding me or ignoring me if I asked for clarification of something that was said. I imagine all of us have that experience of being on the margins and feeling the loneliness, the sense of being empty and life being rather hopeless. Or sometimes people internalize the message—they begin to believe that they actually don’t matter and so they become self destructive in any number of ways. And then there are those who react with anger to the rejection they feel and so go on the attack.

And I also remembered what it was like to be someone who did matter. On the team I have been working with this week, I have experienced what it is to be someone who others greeted whenever I came into the room, someone whose opinion was sought, someone who is listened to, someone who is acknowledged for the risks I take and the particular gifts and experience I bring. I hope that every one of us have had relationships and experiences in which we have known that we matter. In these times we feel hopeful, alive, creative, connected, warmed.

And in this orientation program, we also talked about the macro level and the groups who are systematically told that they matter and those who don't in our society. Politics I think is actually the way we as a society divide the goods and services according to who we think really matters. Those who matter are male, white, educated, rich, able bodied, smart, English speaking, and the straight people. And those who are marginalized are, people of color, those without a lot of formal education, the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, the physically ill, old people, immigrants, non English speaking, fat people, and gay, lesbian and trans gendered people.

Each of us have power to redefine the community—the human community and who matters. We can do this interpersonally by training ourselves to notice who is left out of a conversation and asking a question, we do this by challenging a joke which comes at the expense of some person or group, we can do this by really listening to a child or an adult who is not very coherent. We can do this by countless small gestures like writing a note to someone who we know is hurting, or picking up the phone just to say hello to someone who is mostly forgotten. It is a way of being which is aware and making conscious choices to enlarge the circle of those who matter and to let them know.

And we can also be responsible for using our public forums for redefining who matters. Do the undocumented matter? Do they matter to God? How are we as a society, and as Christians within that society, going to use our power to communicate that these brothers and sisters matter? What about children in the foster care system, do they matter? Prisoners who have just got out of prison? How can we be advocates for these groups with very little power and very little voice?

The good news is that each of us matter infinitely to God, and that the more we know this and take this in, the more we are able to redraw the boundaries of who matters and who doesn't. God sees each one of us as the best mother sees her child, or the best father notices his son.

And while that sounds at first blush like it ought to be good news, it throws us into radical dependence on God's grace and God's grace alone. We can't stand, that is, on our accomplishments, or our wealth, or positive attributes, or good looks, or strengths, or IQ, or our movement up or down the reigning pecking order. There is, suddenly, nothing we can do to establish ourselves before God and the world, except rely upon God's desire to be in relationship with us and with all people. Which means, that we have no claim on God; rather, we have been claimed by God and invited to love others as we've been loved.

Precisely because we have been invited into relationship by God – because, that is, God has conferred upon us freely a dignity and worth we could never secure for ourselves – we are free to do the same for others. We are free to put them before ourselves, to lead them to seats of honor, to invite them to be our dinner guests, not because of what they can do for us, but because of what has already been done for us—all of us.

It's a new humanity Jesus is establishing, a new humanity that has no place for our insecurities and craving for order. Jesus is inviting us to a new vision and way of being where there is no first or last, no honor or shame, only each other, bound to one other in God's abundant love and grace.

(Much of this text was adapted from David Lose, Preaching Chair at St. Paul's Seminary)

