

Risky business: Sunday, September 2 (Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Luke 14:1, 7-14)

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

In the fragility of goodness, author Martha Nussbaum writes, “The peculiar beauty of human excellence just *is* its vulnerability.” Goodness is fragile and its vulnerability is part of its beauty. But in several of these scripture texts, it is not the fragility of goodness that stands out but the sturdiness of righteousness. The psalmist proclaims confidently that the righteous will never be moved or forgotten. Psalm 112 rings with the joyful refrain that the righteousness of those who fear the Lord and delight in God’s commandments will endure forever.

That picture of sturdiness stands in contrast with the way many of us live. Worried about the future and our place in it, we are fearful of bad news and possible disasters. Our fears make us unsteady, especially when we try to anticipate contingencies. Anxious about future troubles, we fail to make the commitments that might enable us to endure those very difficulties.

The righteous, however, have hearts that are steady and firm. In scripture the righteous are gracious, merciful, generous and unafraid of bad news. Their hearts are secure in God. The righteous person is a risk taker who invites all the wrong people to a party and doesn’t worry about being seen with the right people. The righteous one associates with the weak rather than with the powerful.

Human virtues and interactions are fragile, but for followers of Christ they are located in a divine economy that is sturdy. When our security and identity rest in God, it is less difficult to choose the way of humility. Instructions not to put yourself forward in the king’s presence and not to worry about where you’ll be seated are not antiquated etiquette. They are teachings about faithfulness and grace that make sense within God’s larger purposes.

It is still scary to risk being overlooked. Maybe the king or the host won’t notice us if we’re not within view. If we don’t protect our interests we might be stuck in the backwater forever. Worse, people might conclude that we are best suited for a lower place. We worry about our significance, our reputation, our lasting impact.

But ironically, according to these texts, it is those who don't worry about their significance and impact who will be remembered forever. Characteristics of the sturdy righteous are memorable—their startling capacity to keep things in perspective, to live without besetting fears, to be willing to do the right thing and only later to worry about the consequences, to locate themselves and their own futures with those in need of help.

The description of the dinner party in Luke 14 makes me glad to have missed it. It could not have been very pleasant for anyone; tension is thick and almost everyone seems to be worried about the impression he or she is making. The religious leaders are watching Jesus and Jesus is observing the behavior of both host and guests.

It starts out awkwardly for the host when Jesus chooses to heal a sick person on the Sabbath. Bad timing. Then Jesus challenges the ordinary behavior of the guests, who are scrambling for a better place around the table. In the form of a story, Jesus reminds the guests of the wisdom from Proverbs about allowing the host to invite them to an honored place rather than choosing the best seat for themselves. His teaching, seemingly about table manners, is actually about the values of the Kingdom.

Then Jesus addresses the host and conventional understandings of hospitality. Don't worry about your status and benefit when you welcome people, he says. Overcome your concerns about reinforcing useful or reciprocal relationships. Do something really different, Jesus suggests. Invite to your parties the people who seem to bring little with them. The blessing, recognition and benefit you are worried about will come, though not through the means you expected. They will come in a way that makes sense only if you see the bigger picture.

The freedom that comes with knowing we are loved and sustained by God is a freedom to give generously of ourselves and our resources, to give the best place to others without concern. Because of our confidence in God's larger purposes, followers of Jesus can take risks and remain secure, welcome status reversals and live without fear.

When our security is located in God, in Jesus who is "the same yesterday and today and forever," we can deal with the unpredictability and the risks of seeking righteousness. We can show hospitality to needy strangers, spend time with prisoners and share our resources with the poor because God has promised never to

forsake us.

In reflecting on people for whom the word “righteous” seems appropriate, I am reminded of the way the children in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories come to view Aslan, the lion. He is good but not safe. We too are free to be good when we are unaffected by social conventions and expectations that tame us and render us predictable and safe. We can take risks because our place with God is secure; we can bear burdens because we are upheld by God’s gracious hand.

Worrying about position and recognition will keep us susceptible to the latest version of status-seeking and a fear of losing our place. Such anxieties keep us tame, but we don’t need to settle for being tame when we can risk much more.