

Ordinary 22C (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

Jesus offers his unsolicited advice fully aware of the jousting for prominence that occurs in our social spaces. He sees our mad dash to the front row so that we can be seen by the chief executive officer, the potential major donor, or the bishop.

by [William H. Lamar IV](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue



Getty Images

The District of Columbia is awash in banquets. On more than one occasion, I have mistakenly opened a door at a hotel or conference center only to disrupt a fabulous feast to which I had not been invited. There are as many banquets here as there are lobbyists influencing public policy, politicians filling their coffers, social-sector organizations dismantling injustice, and churches launching capital campaigns. Hardly a day goes by that our church is not invited to buy a table at some affair. Will we purchase at the “platinum” rate? Surely a church of our perceived prominence would only want to be associated with precious metals.

The scene is often the same. There is instrumental music that some would call jazz. A local celebrity, maybe a news anchor or an elected official, is the mistress of ceremonies. Food of middling quality is served by anxious, dutiful people who are as aware as those being served of the social inequality that punctuates these affairs. The most prominent people present are on the dais, where they leverage the relational capital they have with those who would like to one day occupy the dais. There is celebration, mingling, and polite applause. There is an anecdote or video designed to meet you at the intersection of heart and wallet. There are pledge cards.

This week's Gospel text lives. My presiding elder, Ronald Eugene Braxton, previously served my congregation with distinction for 14 years. I was his 39-year-old successor, and he showed me this passage in the flesh.

Early in my tenure, Dr. Braxton invited me to join him at a swanky law firm downtown. He didn't say why, but I had learned to respect his pedagogical method of revealing stuff gradually. I have spent most of my career in buildings owned by churches and divinity schools. Law firms use a different decorator. There were fountains, gleaming marble floors, art that was funky yet respectable. Our coats, hats, and umbrellas were checked. We were escorted to an ornate room filled with beautiful people and beautiful food. We took our seats in the back.

At the home of a prominent Pharisee, Jesus asks a confrontational question: Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath? Then he offers some advice. No one asks his opinion; he just speaks. And he speaks in a way that upends social convention and turns tradition on its head.

I don't care for guests who ask confrontational questions. They are the arsonists in the hospitality forest. They delight in watching social situations become conflagrations. And if you spend an evening in my home offering unsolicited advice, I probably won't invite you back. There is nothing like being damned to an evening with the Right Rev. Dr. Bloviator McBloviator.

Yet our churches face confrontational questions, too. Why won't you name white supremacy as foundational to your theology, history, and politics and seek to overthrow it? Why won't you deal with your fear of discussing sex and sexuality and stop dehumanizing LGBT people? Why do you equate discipleship with respectability? Why are you serving as chaplains for Democrats and Republicans and

not demanding justice and righteousness for all of God's people and God's good earth?

Jesus watches the goings-on in the home of the prominent Pharisee. He offers his unsolicited advice fully aware of the jousting for prominence that occurs in our social spaces. He sees our mad dash to the front row so that we can be seen by the president, the mayor, the chief executive officer, the potential major donor, or the bishop. We crave the 21st-century equivalent of reclining on the center couch near the person with the power to make our dreams come true.

But Jesus breaks in with an alternative: humility. Take the lowest place. Assume that you do not know everything. Assume that you are not the greatest, the anointed one.

This is a profoundly un-American impulse. This nation is not humble. Americans assume that American political, economic, and foreign policy prescriptions will fix a world much older and often much wiser. Many American churches—which often seem more American than Christian—lack humility as well. Chauvinism animated their theological forebears to take the faith of the wrongfully convicted Executed One and use it as a tool for plunder. A similar chauvinism is evident in their own dog-whistling around Muslims, immigrants, sexual minorities, and black and brown people. God knows America and many of her churches need Jesus's unsolicited advice.

Humility funds the realm of God. God exalts those who are humble. And because God's realm intersects with our own in the person of Christ and the people of God, the same thing can happen in our realm. Humility can rearrange our relationships and make our world more just and more beautiful. We need the imagination to see beyond what exists. We are not called to be practical. We are called to be the vanguard of a new world, a world where humility is the means of exaltation and *quid pro quo* is replaced by *sola gratis*.

As events slowly unfolded at the extravagant law office where my elder and I were invited guests, a candidate for high local office walked in and took the middle seat at the head table. She was flanked by major business owners and political operatives. "They don't expect us to give," Dr. Braxton said to me. "We don't have their kind of money. We sit in the back, and we watch. And then you'll pray."

What I pray for is a world marked by a different kind of banquet. The great Gregory Porter expresses it beautifully in song: “Well, they gild their houses in preparation for the king . . . / They will be surprised when they hear him say, / ‘Take me to the alley.’”