

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
August 29, 2010

Hebrews 13:1–8; 15–16
Luke 14:1, 7–14

RESPECT AND HONOR

Yes, that dinner took place on a Sabbath; and, yes, for the fourth time now in Luke the Pharisees are watching and waiting, plotting, making plans and, of course, being very critical of even the slightest misstep by this Jesus of Nazareth. Earlier at that same dinner, Jesus had healed again on the Sabbath. And now, as was customary, there were opportunities. Everyone was at their assigned seat, in their places. These opportunities were like those at a wedding: there's the opportunity for toasts, little speeches, congratulations.

And Jesus stands and gives his soliloquy, and he almost quotes Proverbs verbatim, the 25th chapter, verses 6–7: “Do not put yourselves forward in the King's presence, or stand in the place of the great. For it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of the noble.” Jesus' words, as usual, are a challenge not only to those in attendance, but a challenge to the hosts of this dinner party. The advice of the Lord is not about how to be clever in social situations. It's not about how to simply blend in or counsel on how to avoid embarrassment.

The words of the Lord are the words that call forward the behavior of those times when we have all ruined the moment, when it would have been better if we had not spoken than if we had spoken out of turn. Better if we had, in fact, brought light into a conversation rather than increased the darkness. You see, Jesus knows the same thing that ruins a social event will ruin the communion of his church. And that is the desire to see and be seen.

Jesus is teaching much deeper lesson techniques for the social climber. He's asking that we compare the life that we've been called into with the life that we actually live from day to day. Natural human behavior—natural survival instincts—are in conflict with the behavior that God inspires for us. The distinctiveness of being successful is often a contrast to living at peace in God's kingdom. Will we admit this morning that left to our own devices, we will do what this host and these guests in our story were doing? Will we admit that we are prone to be exclusive of those we deem less deserving, that we grasp for position and that we exalt ourselves at every occasion when it seems we won't be judged for this self-exaltation?

Jesus knows our behavior. He knows that our false pride will be our downfall. He knows that we've been created for life together and yet we are so sinful that the quality of that life is corrupted. We've been made in the image of God so that we can discern beauty, so that we can bring out the best in others. We have been endowed, if you will, with the power to leave this world a better place.

I must have been the only person in Washington, D.C. to not know what was happening yesterday on the mall. But when I put this sermon together earlier in the week, I didn't recognize the conflict and the cooperation that might be seen in this sermon. But the truth is if we listen carefully, we remember that we all need affirmation. We all work and long to be respected and honored. And so the intent of yesterday can indeed be lifted up as worthy for we all need that honor in our lives—that respect that God offers us at such great cost. All Jesus wants us to grasp is the simple truth that in order to receive respect we have to show respect.

We honor the good in others and in so doing we become honorable. That's exactly what Jesus means in that 14th chapter of Luke, the 11th verse. We've all experienced that fulfillment when someone is truly respectful and gracious, when someone is genuinely interested in us. That same child I spoke of earlier who schooled me again in what was my role now and what it had been before and how things were different—"You don't have to remind me now when I have a test."—that same child, when she was five or six, climbed into my lap to tell me about her day and when I was distracted, she took my face in her hands and she guided me back to her gaze and she said, "Daddy, I want you to listen to me with your eyes."

And we've known what it was like when someone "listened to us with their eyes." We've come to that place today. I experienced it this week in a conversation with PFC Scott Motley, a newly minted and trained marine, home for a short while after completing Boot Camp. If you speak with him you'll notice that something's changed. He is ever so careful to respond with the respectful word "Sir" at the end of every sentence. Every time, the words "Sir" or "Madam" are inescapable now for him. That simple custom, that convention, shows so much respect that you can only respect Private Motley in return. And I believe it won't matter if Private Motley is speaking to his commanding officer or a humble farmer, his responses will be consistent and respectful. Amen.

Join us as Private Scott Motley reaffirms his baptism. Others who wish to do so may come forward also.