

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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August 28, 2016  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

### Chutes and Ladders in God's Kingdom

Do you remember the childhood board game called "Chutes and Ladders?" The goal of the game is to travel from square #1 to square #100 in a race with other players, taking turns spinning the spinner which tells you how many spaces you can advance. What adds some drama to the game is that along the way, you may land on a square which contains the bottom of a ladder you can climb to the top, jumping ahead several rows. Or, higher up, you may land on a square with a sliding board that will return you down, down, sometimes way down on the board. Those are the chutes. The ladders are exhilarating, but the chutes are humbling, because they can send you, if not all the way back to square one, back to a place you thought you'd long ago put behind you.

Today we hear Jesus telling us about table manners, self-promotion, and self-humiliation. It almost sounds like a game of Chutes and Ladders, where the goal is to advance to the most important seat at the table, taking advantage of whatever short cuts there might be. But just as in the game, there is also the possibility of humiliating demotions. I owe this comparison to a pastor named Mark Ralls, who tells us that Chutes and Ladders provides insight into the culture in which Jesus lived, in which "shame" and "honor" were so important that they shaped everyone's public behavior. (2014, *Feasting on the Gospels*, Luke, Vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 62) Sometimes when we read the Bible we don't understand the context and the mindset of its first hearers. So as we hear today's gospel, we might wonder why a banquet seating chart would be so important. What was Jesus observing at that dinner party? Ralls explains the cultural mindset. To be honored was to be elevated in the eyes of all. To be shamed was a terrible setback. Like a game of Chutes and Ladders—only in first century Palestine, it wasn't just a game.

We may not be all that different. Perhaps you've heard about the Broadway hit musical *Hamilton*, which won 11 Tony awards earlier this year and has received both critical acclaim and astounding box office success. It's about Alexander Hamilton, one of the Founding Fathers of our nation. If you're like me, maybe all you remember about Hamilton is that he was the first Secretary of the Treasury, which explains why his face is on the \$10 bill, and that he was shot to death in a duel with Aaron Burr. (Which reminds me that today's political battles COULD BE WORSE, AND COULD BE LESS CIVILIZED!) But this amazing musical tells the story of Hamilton, who arrived in the colonies on the verge of revolution as an impoverished, orphaned migrant from Jamaica. The play shows how he was absolutely brilliant, intensely hard-working, and an essential player in the early years of our nation. It also shows that he was obsessively ambitious and self-promoting—and his ambition landed him on some of those squares with chutes that sent him sliding way back in the game.

Part of the popularity of this musical is that we see once again the timeless truth that those who exalt themselves are frequently humbled. "Pride goeth before a fall," Proverbs 16:18 is often quoted or paraphrased. We watch our political leaders and hope for the best, but time and again, we see the seduction of power and prestige undo those who rise in the game of politics. We envy our culture's heroes, pop stars and athletes, but when their flaws are exposed, they become public fools and we shake our heads knowingly. We remember how in junior high or high school we too vied to sit at the cool table, to be accepted in the cool crowd—and we were smug about the public downfall of the most popular cheerleader or the big man on campus. And if we're honest, we admit that we still spend time

and energy striving to be popular, or rich, or powerful—even though we know that those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

You can find this saying three times in the gospels on the lips of Jesus. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Humility is a core biblical virtue. It’s not a concept that Jesus invented. It wasn’t new to the Pharisees, who knew the scriptures as well as Jesus did. It also wasn’t a new concept to Jesus’ disciples. But on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, from their old life to a new life in Christ, from living by worldly ways to living the ways of the kingdom of God, they needed lots of examples of how to truly be humble, like Christ. They needed to be shown, as well as told, that God’s favor is on those whom human society looks down on: the poor, the meek, the orphaned, the widowed, the needy, the blind, the outcast, the rejected. They were learning that in God’s kingdom, those on the margins are the most valued. It can be hard to believe. So Jesus gives them, and us, examples gleaned from human behavior, and counterexamples from the perspective of the kingdom of God.

For you can count on it, in Luke’s gospel, any scene around a table is an excuse for a message about the Kingdom of God. This particular scene sparks words of wisdom for guests, and words of wisdom for hosts. For both sides, the central truth is that God’s kingdom welcomes all, without regard to any of the distinctions which might cause exclusion, up/down, more important/less important judgments. For at God’s table of welcome, there are no hierarchies of importance. You can’t social climb in the kingdom. Let it be so in the community of faith which gathers around Jesus.

So we learn humility, because we are humbled by Christ, who came “not to be served, but to serve.” (Mt 20:28) Who told his disciples, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” (Mt 11:29) Who was born in a manger, lived in a peasant village in an obscure part of the Roman Empire, and hung out with fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and lowlifes. The letter of Paul to the Philippians tells us to:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself and became obedient  
 to the point of death—even death on a cross.

(Phil 2:5-8)

Hold on--Jesus’ way sounds like more of a chute than a ladder, doesn’t it? So if we are following him, we will choose to take chutes downward toward those on the rungs below us. And, following Christ, we will discover there that they are the same as we are, beloved of God, bearing the image of Christ to us in a particular way.

Maybe you’ve experienced this gift of learning humility at the Community Café. Perhaps you offered a plate of food to a stranger and the smile of gratitude on that stranger’s face reminded you that you’ve been hungry before, too, and not always so gracious to those who fed you. Christ came to you as that stranger, teaching you humility. Maybe you’ve experienced the gift of learning humility as you begrudgingly dug in your wallet to pay for a child to have a new winter coat, and later saw a child happily playing in the snow. Without knowing it, that child showed you Christ. Maybe it was on a mission trip, when the joy of devoting your life not to serving yourself, but to serving others, filled you

with such peace and fulfillment that you knew yourself transformed. Christ comes to us in a myriad of ways, humbling us and lifting us up to join him in God's mission. And there we learn that we've done nothing to deserve or earn such grace. We discover a willingness to learn from others, and an abundance of teachers around us, especially those who are needy themselves. Humility is an interior attitude that helps us see ourselves as God sees us, no better or worse than one another.

And if we are equally needy, and equally beloved, then we cannot judge one another. When humility is our aim, we become people of grace, not those who measure our social relations by how much they might gain us. Writer Joan Chittister tells us, "true humility is simply a measure of the self that is taken without exaggerated approval or exaggerated guilt," and she summarizes the benefits of humility this way: "The more we know ourselves, the gentler we will be with others." (quoted by Michael E. Williams, "Gentle and Humble of Heart," *Weavings*, May/June 2000, p. 15) Isn't "becoming gentler with others" becoming more like Jesus?

Life on earth may sometimes look like it's about ascending ladders and avoiding chutes, racing to the top to be better than others. But Jesus came to show us life in the kingdom of God, the realm where God is sovereign and God is good, the realm of great reversals. And so, irony of ironies, for this One who willingly took the chute downward, God reversed the direction of history and inserted a ladder that all of us might climb towards God. So it is that on Easter morning, sin and death were humbled, and Jesus Christ was exalted. So it is that those who follow his way, his truth, and his life find our lives reversed, from shame to honor.

And for this we praise God. The hymn found in the letter to the Philippians does not end with the cross, but tells the rest of the story.

Therefore, God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:7-11)

I rest my case. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Choose Jesus's way.