

WWJD?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 14:1, 7-14

Shug Jordan, head football coach at Auburn University, once asked one of his former players, Mike Kollin, who was then playing linebacker for the Miami Dolphins, if he would help his alma mater do some recruiting of football players. Kollin agreed: "Sure, coach, what kind of player are you looking for?"

Coach Jordan said, "Well Mike, you know there's that fellow who when you knock him down, just stays down?" Kollin answered, "We don't want him, do we coach?"

"You're right about that. Then there's that fellow who, when you knock him down, gets up. But when you knock him down again, then he stays down." Kollin said, "We don't want him either, do we coach?"

"No, Mike, we don't. But then there is that fellow, you knock him down, he gets right back up. You knock him down again, he gets up. You knock him down again and he gets up again." Kollin said, "Now that's the guy we want, right coach?"

"No," said Coach Jordan. "We don't want him either. What I want is for you to find me the guy who keeps knocking everyone down. That's the guy we want!"

That story caught my eye, partly since this is the opening weekend of the college football season. But I also like it because I think it is about more than just football. I read it as comment on a mindset that seems to have taken a firm foothold in 21st century American culture. More and more, what really seems to matter is being, indeed celebrating, the one who can knock everyone else down - the one who displays no weakness, indeed who tolerates no weakness.

How else can one explain the Farm Bill passed by the House of Representatives which gives huge subsidies to corporate farms, but eliminates Food Stamps for the poor? Or how about the state legislature of North Carolina which is on the verge of passing a huge tax cut for its wealthiest residents, while at the same time increasing the sales tax on food? Using food as a source of tax revenue? Who is that going to hurt? Across the country, there seems to be some kind of legislative contest going on to prove who is the toughest, meanest, most uncompromising guy around – again, what matters is being the one who can knock everyone else down. And if the weak suffer because of it, well, again, not our problem. We know we really serve.

So I don't know why we even bother with a text like the one we heard today. It seems so out of step, so countercultural. It seems to want to take us in a direction that today's political and cultural climate would denounce as weak, spineless, soft. Okay for a preacher, but not for the tough guys and gals who win elections – not for the real world. But, one might ask, just what *is* the real world? It is interesting how Jesus seems to live by a different set of rules than those by which the world lives. In his world, those whom we place on top sometimes end up on the bottom. And those whom we regard as being on the bottom, often end up on top.

Many of you have probably seen the wristbands, buttons, pencils with the letters WWJD...What Would Jesus Do? And it can be a nice reminder to be kind, helpful, forgiving in day to day life. But perhaps those wristbands, etc. should also come with a warning label. Because it might very well be that what Jesus would do is come here, look at our cultural values and norms, and, instead of patting us on the head and blessing them, proceed to turn them and us all inside out and upside down. He might invite us to join him in a very different way of looking at the world – who is up, who is down; who is in, who is out; who is more ready to receive blessing? His answer might come as a surprise; his answer might very well be something we don't really want to hear.

Believe it or not, I was once a new pastor at this church – not real experienced in parish ministry, not familiar with the church members or the wider community. I wanted to make a good impression. I wanted you to like me. I wanted to do whatever I could to make this relationship work. So early on I carefully weighed my words, was cautious about expressing opinions, shied away from anything that might be too controversial. In truth, I still exercise some caution with my public statements. I still want you to like me.

But Jesus doesn't work that way, does not play that game. He is invited to a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee. This tells us he is going to be with a crowd of high rollers, movers and shakers. And, we are told they are watching him closely. Just who is this teacher who is causing such a ruckus everywhere he goes? But Jesus doesn't hold back. He assesses the situation and then starts right in on the host and his guests. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend move up higher...'"

A word about meals in 1st century Palestine...Meals were not only an important social convention, but they were also a means by which people were recognized in their class and rank in society. So where you sat and with whom you sat were highly significant. Wouldn't sit and eat with just anybody. At a wedding feast, male guest reclined on couches, with the center couch being the place of honor. The ones who sat there were chosen according to wealth, power or office. And if a man of more prominence arrived late, someone of lesser rank would be asked to move to a less prestigious location.

So on one hand Jesus is offering some sound practical advice. Why risk humiliation? Start with a lower seat. But he is also making a rather sharp comment about their mad scramble to get the best, most prestigious seats, rather like the boys at our grandson's birthday party running to be first in line when the cake gets cut. Maybe I will get the biggest piece. But, says Jesus, in the Kingdom of God, such symbols of status and power do not matter. Instead, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And your mad scramble for prestige and recognition will mean nothing.

But he is only getting warmed up. He also has some pointed comments about the guest list. How come you only invite your friends or those who make you feel comfortable or who share your economic level or who can advance your status? Wait just a minute, Jesus, now you're getting personal. What business of yours is it who I invite to my next cocktail party. Of course I'm going to invite my friends and those with whom I am comfortable. The Love Choir is probably not going to spend a lot of time associating with the local chapter of the Tea Party and vice versa. And members of The Community Church aren't going to spend a lot of time discussing theology with followers of Pat Robertson and the 700 Club. C'mon, Jesus, be reasonable. Guess we should have known there would be trouble as soon as he accepted the dinner invitation.

For he proceeds announce something extravagant, radical and rambunctious as he shares what our guest list should look like: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed." In other words, don't be so strategic with your invitation. You need to expand your welcome beyond every limitation and every exclusion. Why is he doing this to us? Why is he jerking us around like this? Why didn't I stay home this morning?

I have heard it said that Jesus of Nazareth was a true charismatic, which is to say as he walked the world, he saw another world, a world different from the one most of us see, an alternative reality which, for him, was the true reality...blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers, turn the other cheek, as you did for the least of these, you did it for me. He took what we accept as conventional wisdom – the one with the most toys wins – and proposed an alternative wisdom – only in giving your life do you find true life; the first will be last and the last will be first.

And suddenly we are no longer talking simply about a dinner party and a seating chart. We are talking about how God does business in the world, about whom God welcomes around the table, and what God wants from us. In the words of Tim Conder, a pastor in North Carolina, "Jesus' teachings take the common table, the center of his world, and flip it upside down. His table stories describe a revolutionary, redemptive kingdom that confronts the norms of upwardly mobile networking and competition. He eschews the expectations of polite society for a story of revolution. This is the nature of God's kingdom." I recall the time Mother Teresa was asked, "How do you measure the success of your work? She thought about the question, gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts."

I wonder if Jesus received any more dinner invitations? Talk about a buzz killer! For to eat and drink with Jesus is to find ourselves in tension with so many of the assumptions and practices of our culture. In a time when we are so divided, with so many hate-filled words being carelessly spoken – or perhaps very carefully spoken – when the "other", the one not like me, is so feared and stranger meets stranger with violence, higher and higher walls, restrictive laws, and suspicion, how strange to hear words of acceptance, compassion, reconciliation and extravagant welcome. Yes, Jesus' ways are so different from our ways. There is such a gap between his system of values and ours. The very ones we exclude, he invites. But, amazingly, he also opens the door to us. There is a place at the table, yes, for us. He seems to believe that we can be so much more than we have been, that change is possible, new life within our grasp. And even when we do not rise to his invitation, he never stops offering it.

"As for you, the next time you give a party, don' invite people like yourself...No, invite the lame, the blind, the poor and all those who don't have a prayer of ever reciprocating your invitation."

Really, who in the world could possibly think that this is the proper way to give a dinner party? You know who.