

A Sermon for the People of God at First Christian Church, Ames, Iowa, by Mary Jane Button-Harrison and David Digby

¹Another Sabbath Day came and Jesus was invited to an official's home for a meal. This fellow was a leader of the Pharisees, and Jesus was still under close surveillance by them.

⁷Then he noticed how the guests were jockeying for places of honor at the dinner, so he gave them advice.

Jesus ⁸Whenever someone invites you to a wedding dinner, don't sit at the head table. Someone more important than you might also have been invited, ⁹and your host will have to humiliate you publicly by telling you to give your seat to the other guest and to go find an open seat in the back of the room. ¹⁰Instead, go and sit in the back of the room. Then your host may find you and say, "My friend! Why are you sitting back here? Come up to this table near the front!" Then you will be publicly honored in front of everyone. ¹¹Listen, if you lift yourself up, you'll be put down, but if you humble yourself, you'll be honored.

¹²Jesus still wasn't finished. Now he turned to the host who had invited him to this gathering.

Jesus When you host a dinner or banquet, don't invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, or your rich neighbors. If you do, they might invite you to a party of their own, and you'll be repaid for your kindness. ¹³Instead, invite the poor, the amputees, the cripples, the blind. ¹⁴Then you'll be blessed because they can never repay you. Your reward will come from God at the resurrection of the just and good.

DD: When you're in prison, where and how you sit for meals makes all the difference. If you try to sit with a group that does not welcome you, you will be punished. The punishment will probably be severe.

¹ Brian McLaren, *The Voice of Luke: Not Even Sandals* (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007) p. 103 f.

- MJ:** When you're in junior high, how you dress and where and how you sit for meals in the school cafeteria makes all the difference. You are known by the company you keep and you must fit in or be banned to social hell for the rest of your life.
- DD:** When you're at a political fund raising event, how you dress and where you sit at the banquet table marks you as a serious contributor – or not. If you intend to have influence, should the election go your way, you will make sure you are seated at the front of the room
- MJ:** When you live in a rigid society with prescribed hospitality codes where you are seated at a wedding banquet tells all the world how important you are. People keep score. You do your best to have a good seat, even if you have to do some maneuvering and pay some servants to ensure your status.
- DD:** What a sorry way to count a person's worth. It's so... so artificial. It's as phony as a gala of Hollywood social climbers or a room-full stiff upper-crust Bostonians trying to outdo each other with their wealth.
- MJ:** Jesus offers an alternative. He's not interested in teaching a new reverse-psychology technique to get the same old rewards, pretending humility in hopes of public honoring... but a different way of surviving those dreaded social functions. In fact, for Jesus, deciding to break through all of society's pecking-orders that establish dominance and power, is a life-giving, kingdom-of-God way of being. The survival tactic of the day: sometimes, out of humility, you decide to go last.

- DD:** Laurence Gonzales, the man we've quoted during the summer survival sermon series says something very true here: "It's not what's in your pack that separates the quick from the dead. It's not even what's in your mind. Corny as it sounds, it's what's in your heart."²
- MJ** What's in your heart. I'm thinking about the survivor TV shows where people vote each other off the island or out of the house. To not get voted off contestants try all kinds of tactics: being the powerful leader, having some indispensable skill, having lots of sex appeal. What's in their heart is not creating some kind of viable community of joyous harmony, it's self-preservation. Survival tactic of the day: Sometimes, out of care for the group, you decide to go last.
- DD** Jesus saw a very different picture where guests tasted the abundance of the banquet because they knew each of them had something valuable to contribute, that each was worthy and worthwhile, that each was equal to all the rest in God's eyes, and God's eyes are the ones that matter.
- MJ** As Gonzales reminds us: "A closed attitude, an attitude that says, 'I already know,' may cause you to miss important information. Survival instructors refer to that quality as 'humility.'" Gonzales continued, "In my experience, elite performers, such as high-angle rescue professionals, who risk their lives to save others, have an exceptional balance of boldness and humility."³ In survival situations, emotional survival or physical survival either one, the same is true: egoism and arrogance will get you dead. Humility and a willingness to learn is the way to life. Sometimes, to be tuned to your heart, you decide to go last.

² Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why* (New York: W.W. Norton Press, 2003) p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

- DD** Deciding to go last is a difficult lesson to learn. It means we have to learn to trust one another, to care about each other, to find some way to admire one another. Survivors are those people who look out for the others in the same boat with them and find a way to help. People who perish, it has been proven time and again, are those who only watch out for themselves at the expense of the others.
- MJ** Another kind of survival series on TV pits two rugged outdoorsmen, Cody Lundin and Dave Canterbury, together in survival situations. Cody is a naturalist who goes barefoot, carries little gear, and teaches aboriginal living skills. He lives in a self-designed solar earth house, catches rainwater, composts all wastes and pays nothing for heating or cooling.
- DD** Dave Canterbury, on the other hand, is a military-trained scout, sniper, hunter, and tracker. He teaches unarmed combat and close-quarter techniques to US soldiers. He relies on technology, training, and toughness.
- MJ** The two could not be more different. At the series' beginning they did not particularly like each other. They disagreed about everything. The series plan is to drop them into survival situations: a shipwreck in icy waters off the coast of Nova Scotia, being lost in underwater caves while diving, being stranded on top of a mountain in New Zealand, being lost in a desert miles from civilization, and so on. To stay alive they had to learn to trust each other and to yield to the other's superior knowledge in certain situations. Cody is afraid of heights and the only way he could lower himself off a high cliff above a raging waterfall was to trust Dave to tell him how to do it. Cody knows how to make a simple shelter that will keep them warm through below freezing nights and Dave relies on him to keep them warm. Together they survive where neither could alone.
- DD** Perhaps Jesus instructed hosts to reach out to people who are poor or suffer from physical handicaps because of that very fact: together we survive where neither

could alone. People whose life experiences are very different from ours have something valuable to contribute, if we are willing to put on humility and learn.

- MJ** The Christian Church used to have a program called Mother-to-Mother which paired middle-income women with lower-income women so they could talk together about raising their kids, getting along in their homes, meeting their problems. Frankly, in those days, it was wealthier white women meeting with less wealthy African-American women, with the unspoken understanding that the middle-class white women would know more about successful living than the lower-class women. One middle-class woman wrote in her evaluation, at the end of her year in the program: “I thought I would be the teacher and my new friend would be filled with gratitude and admiration. What happened is that, halfway through the year my husband left me, and it was my amazing African-American friend who knew how to survive. She, much more than I, knew how to get by on less, how to juggle resources, how to take kids all by yourself, and how to hold your head up with everybody else is judging you.”
- DD** Sometimes you go last, not because you are trying to make yourself look humble when you really want the best seat in the house, but because you care as much about all the others in the room as you do about yourself.
- MJ** Sometimes you go last and invite all kinds of people who are different from you into your home, taking the risk of reaching out to strangers, not because you can somehow use them on the social circuit, but because they can become your teachers and guides and friends.
- DD** Jesus looked around the room and thought about the kingdom of God where people rejoice together at the banquet feast of God, where the water is eternal and the food is abundant and the joy runs down and spills over and life is good.

MJ Can you imagine a junior high cafeteria where the queen bees and the bullies and the jocks sit down with the nerds and the geeks, the wanna-bees and zit-covered and socially incompetent to share a glad luncheon?

DD Can you imagine a prison eating hall where the white collar embezzlers sit down with the inner-city drug lords and with the knife-wielding murderers, along with the guards for a feast where each is welcomed and all are valuable?

MJ That's crazy.

DD That's the kingdom of God!