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Luke 14:1:7-14

DOWNWARD MOBILITY?

There used to be a program on NPR called *The Savvy Traveler*, which gave advice on how to travel in style and get what you deserved while on the road. It was hosted by former Olympic swimmer turned travel guru Diana Naiad. On one episode, she explained why you should never take the first hotel room you are offered — it's just not done.

Why? Because you will be given an inferior room, a smaller room than you deserve — even a less expensive room than you paid for. If you take it, the hotel wins, and you have been put in your place. Fight back, she says, and demand to see other rooms, rooms that are up to your standards, and reflect your status.

The same thing is true when you are being seated at a restaurant. They will always try to seat you next to the door leading into the kitchen. Don't accept it. Request a table that is up to your standards. If nothing is available that meets with your approval, either wait, or leave the restaurant in a huff.

When making plane reservations, always indicate whether you prefer the window or the aisle. And by the way, notice that nobody ever asks you if you would prefer the middle seat, because no one prefers the middle seat — that's where you get stuck, between a sumo wrestler and a plus-sized fashion model who is doing her nails. The middle seat may be our fate, but it is never our destination. It's where you end-up. It's like Denny's. Nobody ever *plans* to go to Denny's to eat ("Honey, let's go to Denny's tonight!"). You *end up* at Denny's, at 3 in the morning, by a process of elimination.

This society, and every society, has an elaborate hierarchy of "space." The more privileged you are, the more space you can put between yourself and your neighbor — the farther back your house will sit from the street, and the larger your lawn will be — which led D.H. Lawrence to pen that great line about the rich: "broad lawn, narrow minds."

Whenever I pull up to the guard house of a gated neighborhood and phone up the person

I'm visiting (sometimes even to visit members of this church) the voice will say, "Who is it?" I like to say, "It's the riffraff you are trying to keep out!" Whereupon one of my friends likes to reply: "Good, the gate is obviously working!"

Did you know that one of the most revealing of all statements made by human beings when there is change in the air, when there is revolution brewing, or when someone who has been on the outside is trying to get on the inside, or at least join the party, is this: "Don't you people know your place?"

The civil rights movement in this country was started by a cleaning woman named Rosa Parks who did a very radical thing: she refused to get up out of her seat and give it to a white man who thought it was his to demand. She stayed in her place as a way of not staying in her place, and that started the Montgomery bus boycott which started the civil rights movement. Or as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "She stayed seated, and the whole world stood up."

When gays speak of having "come out of the closet," they are talking about the hierarchy of space. Closets are where things are stored, out of sight, but nobody lives in there. There's no table in a closet; no communion in a closet, nothing that you want anyone to see. We hide things in closets.

Conversely, when people complain that minority groups are "in their face," they are also talking about space. Communication scholars have identified what is called "personal space," and in American society that is from zero to 18 inches away from our face. If someone stands closer than that, we feel uncomfortable, because they are "in our space."

In the airport, we hear this announcement or some version of it: "We'll pre-board our first class, Advantage and Gold Club members first." *Then* we board mothers with small children, or those needing "special assistance." Forget for a moment the little semantic problem with the term *preboarding* (the comedian George Carlin said about the word "pre-boarding" "What is that, anyway, getting on before you get on?"). The real issue here is that special people get special privileges, even before those people who are disabled, or in a wheelchair, or struggling with a baby, or two, or three. Gold Club members come before mothers.

Then there is the hierarchy of space aboard the plane. Everyone sitting in coach (and that's me because I'm cheap), has to file past all the people sitting in first class. I've never flown first class, but I'm sure if someone wanted to give me an "upgrade" I'd jump on it. Anyway, my favorite thing to do is to look at the people in first class as I walk by them, and their job is not to look at me — a mere coach class peon. They are buried in their papers and being given special attention, and so their first-class gaze is averted as the rest of us commoners file by like cattle, back to where we belong, in some middle seat. But then how odd that we should think of anyone riding an airplane as a commoner? The workers loading the bags on the plane are a step down, and then the janitors in the airport, and then the person who has never gotten on an airplane because they can't afford it, and then the homeless person on the street — who is still a notch above many of the abjectly poor in the world, who are picking through garbage piles to eat, or selling their bodies. It's all about the hierarchy of space.

In first century Palestine, it was no different – especially around the table, which was the most sacred space of all. In that society, meals were not just refueling operations (pop something in the micro and eat it in your car), they were symbolic maps of status and social relationships, it was at the table that you knew your place and the importance of staying in it.

That’s what makes this text so shocking. And I don’t hear the word “shocking” all that often when Christians are taught about the Bible. I hear adoration, obligation, comfort, you should know it, read it, live by it — but I almost never hear anybody say about the Bible, “Watch out, read at your own risk.” Has anyone ever checked into a hotel room, looked at the Gideon Bible in their night stand, called the front desk and said, “Could you send someone up to get this? I’ve got children.”

I mean everyone recommends that people read the Bible, print more copies, get them into the hands of more people, and then we write a check for \$10,000 so that we can sit next to our favorite political candidate at the fund-raiser. What does that buy you? They call it “access.” It’s all about space.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 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’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In other words, don’t promote yourself, lest you be demoted by others. Demote yourself and if you are fortunate, someone else may promote you. Humility and hospitality are inseparable, and the Buddhists have this part right, the ego is the enemy. But there is an Islamic word for it as well: *nafs* – the Muslim word for “greedy soul.”

And I don’t know about you, but the older I get, the more I think that the way a human being *occupies space* says as much about him or her than anything else. In a crowded room, take note of who gives way, and who stands astride their spot and refuses to move, even when someone is approaching who needs to pass.

There are people who simply won’t move; either because they believe that they are entitled to the space they are occupying, or because it is a kind of silly, subliminal game they are playing to see if the other person will give way – like a game of ego-chicken.

There is a hierarchy of space on the highway, the bigger the vehicle, the more likely it is to be driven by someone claiming to be “born again” and the more likely they are to cut you off in traffic, tailgate you if you are doing something quaint like driving the speed limit, or flip you off if you inconvenience them in any way. Watch out especially for red and white pickup trucks. They usually have bumper stickers that say, I OWN THE ROAD (right next to the one that puts

Obama in his place. It says, “I’ll keep my guns, my money, and my freedom—you keep the Change).”

The other day I watched a guy park in a handicap space and then skip into the restaurant. Everyone thinks they are special, and that’s what wrong with the whole country. One of the biggest problems they have at the Department of Motor vehicles are people getting handicaps stickers who are not handicapped, so they can get all the best parking spaces. You can see them retrieve the tag from the glove compartment and hang in on their rear view mirror and then walk into the store without any sign of being handicapped. At these moments, I must admit to having evil thoughts. I’m tempted to say, “Gosh, you don’t looked handicapped, is it a mental thing?”

Now listen to what Jesus says next. When you throw a party, don’t invite people who will invite you back; rather invite people who cannot repay you, because you will be repaid in other ways that have nothing to do with reciprocity.

Good grief, doesn’t Jesus know anything about planning a party? Has he never read Miss Manners? We say to ourselves, “Let’s see, they invited us for dinner; we better invite them for dinner. It’s our “turn” we say. . .we owe them. . .the ball is in our court” and all that. Nobody sits down and plans a dinner party by saying, “Let’s see, who can we invite that will mess up the house, eat our food, and then disappear without ever sending us a thank-you note?”

One of the gospel’s most scandalous tenets is that we ought to do things because they are right, not because they are advantageous. A French philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas said that the baseline for all ethical behavior is “responsiveness to the summons of the other, especially the oppressed.” Western philosophy, he said, has gotten it wrong by assuming that there is no “other,” because we are really all the same. And being all the same means that the appropriate response is *reciprocity*. That is, you assume that because others are the same as you, you should treat them as you would want to be treated. Isn’t that the Golden Rule, and isn’t that what all religions are really all about?

Levinas argues against any such reduction of the other, and insists that we are responsible for the other regardless of reciprocity. That is, we are not just responsible to those that seem to be like us – but also to those who are fundamentally different. The word that another French philosopher Jacques Derrida uses is *diff—erance* – a conflation of the verbs “to differ” and “to defer” – suggesting that the God of the Bible is the transcendent One who differs radically from the world and whose full revelation is deferred until the end of time.

In the meantime, our job is to be what Derrida calls “hypervigilant.” And that means not just by thinking, but rather by *doing*. For in practicing faith and hope in the anticipation of justice yet to come, we respond to the call of the other – which is the same as responding to the call of God. It’s what Jesus meant when he said, “When you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

As we stand on the threshold of another day honoring the life of Dr. King, I am always amused when I hear someone say about a person of color: “You know, I don’t even notice what

color they are; black, brown, pink, white, they are precious in His sight – I’m color-blind myself.” Really? One of the first things I notice about someone who is black is that he or she is black. We are not being called to denial by this text, but to transformation.

What really matters isn’t that we notice difference, but how we respond to it. You can be as politically correct as you want to be, but the truth is, when I work under the dashboard of my car, people think there’s something wrong with my car, but they don’t think I’m stealing the radio. Never once have I been asked, as a white man, to “speak for the people of my race.”

If I did something well, nobody ever said that I was a “credit to my race.” And I could make mistakes or be rude without it be attributed to the “poverty of my race.” Nobody ever said that dancing came naturally to me, because I had rhythm (believe me). And not once in my life has anyone ever referred to my ethnic group as “you people.”

Not long ago, on the cul-de-sac just three blocks from here where we have lived for 25 years, the house next door to us became a rental house. For a few months, people were coming by to look at it, to see if they wanted to live there. One day, one of my neighbors, the one who put a giant flag pole in his front yard on which he flew both the American Flag and the Home Depot NASCAR flag and wore the t-shirts that said, “Jesus Love You” came over looking positively panicked. “You know what’s going to happen here don’t you Robin?” “No,” I said, “what’s going to happen?”

“We’re going to get a section eight.” I didn’t know what that was at the time. “What’s a section eight?” He looked at me like I must be book smart but stupid to the ways of the world. “That’s the DHS term for subsidized housing. A section eight came by the other day in a big old car, with all the kids hanging out the window, and they just drove around the circle real slow, checking it out.”

A section eight? You mean a black, single mother who is on welfare. There goes the neighborhood. I looked at his Jesus t-shirt again and wondered why he didn’t complain that nobody had invited her in for dinner, and all her kids too — giving her the best seats, the section eight seats if you will, since we were a couple of white guys who were lucky enough to own our homes.

Not long ago, I was on a plane going somewhere to make a speech. And there was a young man sitting close by talking on his cell phone. You know, you can tell a lot about a person by the way he uses a cell phone.

Cell phones also make it possible to overhear lots of conversations that you would rather *not* overhear – and makes me long for the days of the phone booth. Apparently, this man was talking to a friend about his upcoming marriage. He said that he was about to “spring the question” to a woman named Beth.

And then what followed was an intense conversation about the relative merits of Beth, her pros and cons. He described her physical appearance, the things she liked and disliked, her

friends, her activities, and what they shared in common. He was talking very loudly, and all of us within twenty feet, now felt as if we knew Beth.

It was like a Woody Allen movie. I thought he was going to stop at one point and begin asking the rest of us what we thought. But it was at this point in the conversation that he paused for a moment and began to describe the differences between them – the ways in which they were not so compatible. “It’s not all a pretty picture” he said. “She’s a Democrat, and she’s into all these poverty issues. And she’s Catholic and she goes to church and we’ll probably have to get married in the Catholic Church and I’ll have to go through those classes.”

“I don’t know bro,” he said, “. . .it may be tough. . .but she’s such a fox.”

I don’t have a good feeling about that marriage. I alternate between thinking it’s doomed, and think perhaps she’s the only hope he’s got. The rhetoric of reciprocity. What’s in it for me; will I get my needs met; will I be sufficiently fed, watered, and amused. Is this, or is this not going to turn out to be a good investment for me. Better sign a pre-nup.

But if I read this parable correctly, the kingdom is not about reciprocity. It’s about the sublime foolishness of doing something for someone who can’t do anything for you. In fact you will be blessed by this, says Jesus “because they *cannot* repay you.”

If you want to get a glimpse of what this means, join the 363 group one of these Saturdays, there’s not a whole lot of actual, or even potential reciprocity there.

Or come do art projects with the kids at Taft Middle School. They are not going to send you a thank you note. Or take the trip to Nicaragua that has changed the lives of so many of us — and know that you will get nothing out of it except the change to do something good and get absolutely nothing tangible in return. We send out these tax statements and I love the phrase, “no tangible goods or services were received in exchange for this gift.” Of course not, otherwise it’s not a gift.

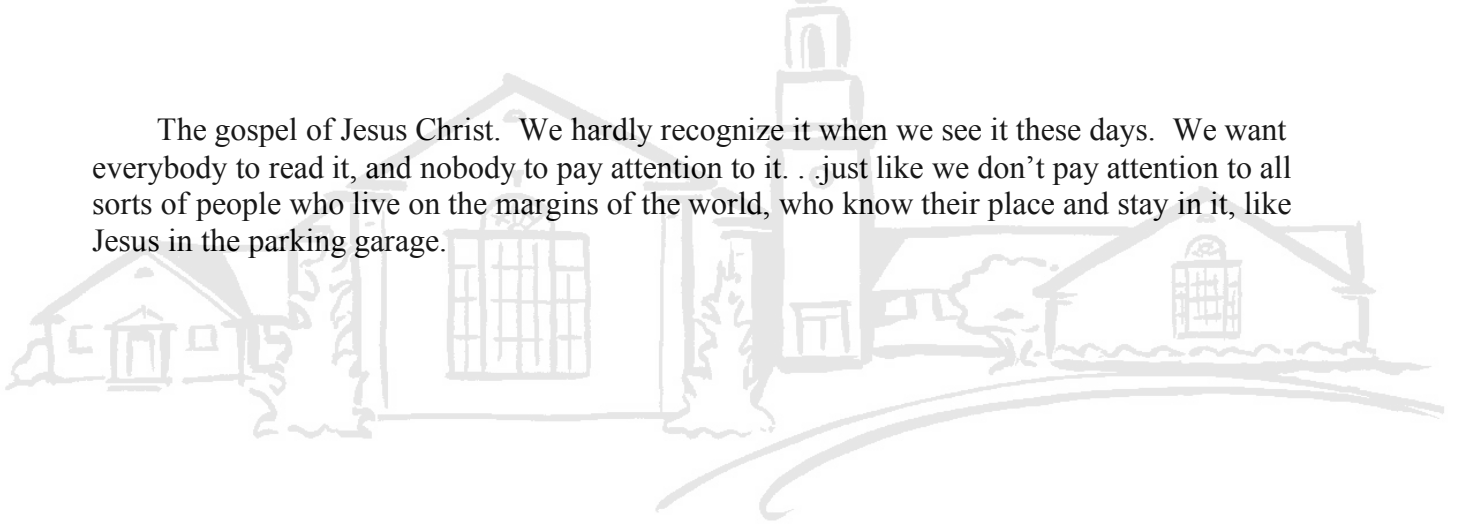
If you want to put your finger on the pulse of reciprocity in our culture, look at the personal ads – people advertising themselves in the hope that someone just like them will be able to fill in the missing gaps, providing low-maintenance, high-energy reciprocity. . . *40-something single white female, looks 30, seeks knight in shining armor, non-smoking, financially secure, spontaneous, height and weight proportionate single white male for long walks, romantic interludes, and world-travel. No children, no baggage, no emotional amputees.*

But just imagine, for a moment, a personal ad written in the spirit of this parable? *Wanted: down-and-outs, appropriate hygiene optional, financially challenged, emotionally fragile, substance dependent – hates to travel, looks older than actual age (height and weight disproportionate). . . romantically challenged, hates long-walks, long talks, or any other touchy-feely activity that des not involve beer, darts, and crude jokes – for a dinner party in Nichols Hills. Absolutely nothing in common with host required. . .Regrets only; come as you are; casual attire. No gifts please. . .park your truck, at the curb and leave it overnight and your host will pay the ticket.*

Returning from a trip to see my parents a couple of weeks ago, I was walking to my car in the darkness of the parking garage and pulling my rolling suitcase behind me, with my laptop computer perching on it but not secure. At some point, it fell off, but because of the sound of the wheels I hadn't heard it. When I reached my car, I realized that it was gone, and with it, all the writing I had done on my new book, which I had not yet backed up.

Just then, I heard a car honking, and a young Native American man got out, dressed for work at the airport (he looked like a baggage handler), and in his hand was my laptop computer, my beloved Mac Air to be exact. "You dropped this," he said, and handed it to me. I didn't know at that moment if I should give him a tip or if he would be insulted by that — but I offered. "I don't want anything for doing the right thing," he said, "you would have done the same thing for me. Have a good evening," he said smiling, and walked away.

The gospel of Jesus Christ. We hardly recognize it when we see it these days. We want everybody to read it, and nobody to pay attention to it. . . just like we don't pay attention to all sorts of people who live on the margins of the world, who know their place and stay in it, like Jesus in the parking garage.



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