

Places of Honor by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Matthew 23:1-12 October 30, 2011

You meet some interesting people in this profession. I was in a meeting recently where we were discussing an initiative and its sustainability. The group I was in was trying to figure out what next steps we needed to take to make a certain ministry a success. We discussed various promotional ideas and financing for them as well as for some other needs and we seemed to be making some headway, discussing, refining and deciding our next steps, when one gentleman who had been silent for the first part of the meeting spoke up. "Well," he said, "I have been listening to all of you for some time now and you have all made excellent suggestions and moves. But here is what I think needs to happen..." and off he went onto a presentation that no one asked him to give, that clearly had been formed in his mind before he came to the meeting and that had no bearing on where the conversation had been going for the previous 30 minutes. As he spoke he looked almost exclusively at his notes, made little eye contact and barely paused long enough for any of us to make any suggestions or ask any questions.

After about 45 minutes of listening to his monologue, the chair of the committee interrupted him and asked if anyone else had anything to add to the conversation.

No one did.

As I was reflecting on this experience, I realized that this man was making a far greater statement than any of his words would make. He thought he was telling us the error of our ways, telling us how to properly proceed as a committee, when in reality he was giving us a lesson in the decided lack of humility.

But he's not the only one in my life lacking humility. None of us is above wanting a little honor now and then.

I must confess that I am someone who isn't above sidling up to people who are famous. I remember back when I was a student pastor in Denver and our church was celebrating some major anniversary, culminating with a fancy dinner in a private room of a restaurant. The whole church was there and our speaker for the evening was a TV anchor from one of the local stations.

At dinner I sat just to the left of our speaker and the lead pastor sat to his right. My husband sat next to me and he will tell you that I barely looked in his direction let alone spoke to him during the entire dinner. I was either listening to the conversations the TV anchor was having or I was trying to spark some conversation of my own.

I was caught up in the honor of sitting next to a well-known person and was aware that others were looking at me sitting next to this famous person.

I remember it as a dazzling evening, I was dazzled by this person I had seen on TV, I was dazzled by his brief, yet fitting, words to the gathered group, I was dazzled by being seen sitting next to this person that everyone knew.

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I don't think I'm as star struck now as I was then, but I haven't completely gotten over my celebrity worship. Even though people are people no matter what they do for a living, I still find myself unduly admiring those who are famous.

It is natural for us to seek the places of honor. All but the most shy among us enjoy a little recognition now and then.

But too much honor is something that can blind us to what is truly important.

We see this in today's reading.

Today's reading is another jab at the Pharisees. Though Jesus spoke to the crowd and to his disciples, his intended target was the Pharisees, who stood not all that far off.

Let's just take a minute and learn a bit about the Pharisees. Despite what we have been hearing about them for the last several weeks, they weren't an entirely bad lot.

Apparently the Pharisees, in the time of Jesus, were a relatively new group, a relatively new movement that had been established only one or two hundred years before the birth of Jesus. And as a relatively newly established group, they were looking for credibility and at the same time competing for followers, competing with the Jesus followers for more converts. The Pharisees were one of many Jewish sects, seeking to preserve Israel's identity by strict adherence to purity and Sabbath laws. The Pharisees took the Torah seriously and tried to interpret and live the laws in ways that touched daily life.

Their goal was to "make a fence for the law"—in other words, to protect it from infringement by surrounding it with specific rules of interpretation and application to daily life.

An admirable goal, to enhance inward faithfulness to the law, became burdensome when they began to attach the rules to the minutiae of life, taking away the law as a celebratory response to God's goodness. Their specific rules of interpretation of the law got to the point of being ridiculous. For example, tailors were not allowed to go out carrying a needle late in the day before the Sabbath, in case they were caught with it still in their pocket when the Sabbath began.

Anyone in the faith community was allowed to go for a walk on the Sabbath day; they just weren't allowed to go far. The distance of an allowed Sabbath walk was two thousand cubits, or roughly two-thirds of a mile, a distance determined by reference to the space between the people of Israel and the Ark of the Covenant when they first entered Canaan.

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The Pharisees were, for the most part, good hearted people, trying to preserve the purity of the Jewish people by giving them detailed instructions on how to observe the Jewish laws, all 613 of them.

But the problem came when they started to think too much of themselves, when they started to think of themselves as the only and definitive interpreters of the Jewish laws, when they started to think of themselves as the desirable and much sought after experts.

A few things happen to you when you start to think more of yourself than you ought. One is that you stop thinking about other people, except to the extent that they can serve you and make things better for you by adoring you and your abilities. The second thing that happens to you when you start to think too highly of yourself is that you block off any opportunity for growth on your part. You stop learning and growing because you assume that you have arrived at the destination of ultimate and complete knowledge about all things. And finally, when your attention is all on yourself and your abilities, you forget that the source and giver of all of life, is also the one who gave you all these abilities in the first place.

A consequence of these things is that you start to lose true relationships with friends and with others. You no longer grow in your faith or your life. You lose contact with your God. When you are considered the expert, many come to you for advice, but few still turn to you for comfort or companionship.

Clarence Jordan, author of the Cotton Patch Gospel, got a PhD in the Greek New Testament when he was 26 years old. He was an expert in biblical knowledge, but what compelled him was his concern for justice. From an early age he was troubled by the racial and economic injustice that he perceived in his community. So rather than seek the money and prestige a Ph.D. could afford, he and his wife along with another couple founded Koinonia, an interracial, Christian farming community. He did this in the 1940s in South Georgia. 'Dr. Jordan' became 'farmer Clarence' because of his devotion and loyalty to God and God's call to servant leadership. When interracial issues became contentious in the 1950s and 60s, the Koinonia community became the target of a stifling economic boycott and repeated violence, including several bombings. But through it all Jordan continued to follow what he believed was God's call to promote racial and economic justice.

Because of his humility and his desire to live out God's teaching to love your neighbor as yourself, he founded a movement and a community that exists even today, a community that lives out the ideal of loving your neighbor as yourself, of humility and justice.

Author Alex Haley, author of Roots, has a picture in his office of a turtle sitting on top of a fence post. The picture reminds him of an important fact: The turtle did not get on top of the fence post without some help. Haley says that every time he starts thinking about

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his fame and accomplishments, he reminds himself that he didn't get where he was without some help.

None of us got to where we are without some help. None of us is self-made or self-sufficient. We rely upon God for all that we have and all that we are. That is why we come together week after week, to be nourished in our faith. That's why we have preaching and teaching. That's why we gather together as a community of faith, to remind ourselves of who and whose we are.

It goes against human nature to be humble. We all want a little recognition now and then. And so it is that we come to the one who gave us all that we have and all that we are and loves us beyond measure and we realize that there is only one who is worth following, worth calling Teacher, worth calling Lord, worth calling Master.