

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stepping aside to build up

Luke 14:1, 7-14

School started this past week for students in Minneapolis. Our Mennonite Worker friend Mark Van Steenwyk posted on Facebook how, despite the 90+ degree heat, his son Jonas insisted on wearing a long-sleeved shirt and pants on his first day of kindergarten. Knowing a bit about Jonas, I imagine he was dressing this way to show how much regard, how much anticipation, he had for his very first day of school. He wanted to give it his very best. He probably didn't give even the smallest thought to how others might see him.

But I can imagine that our Sophias, Hannahs, and Joy might have gone (or will go) about choosing their clothes for the first day of school with a few other people in mind. They no doubt know what Jesus felt like when he went to have dinner with a group of religious leaders. Luke's telling of the story includes the line "they were watching him closely." Sophia, Hannah, Joy: does that feel familiar? Do you feel that others are watching you to see how you dress and how you act when you're in school?

The culture in our schools, particularly in middle school and high school is one of status, cliques, and popularity. So much depends on appearance, what one wears, what sports team or cheer leading squad one is on. The lofty goals of education--of learning new things, exploring new ideas, preparing oneself to make a difference in the world can quickly and easily devolve into a popularity contest that differentiates between "who's in" and "who's out." At the least it leaves many feeling uncomfortable and questioning their self-worth; at worst it takes the ugly form of bullying.

Sophia, Hannah and Joy, I want you to know that everyone of us here today has experienced peer pressure at some point in our life—and so did Jesus. Everyone of us has felt people watching us—and so did Jesus. And the two stories that we heard today from Jesus give us direction and give us courage for how to act when we find ourselves in this kind of situation—of pressure to be popular, to be like everyone else, to get ahead—even at the expense of others.

In the first story, Jesus says: don't try to be cool! Don't try to be noticed and to sit with the coolest folks. Because you'll probably get bumped. He was actually quoting a well-known proverb which says:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence

or stand in the place of the great;

for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"

than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. (Proverbs 25:6-7)

Jesus knew that there is no security with status. The person or persons at the top stay there by keeping others in their place. And the only way to garner favor is to do as that person or persons wishes, regardless of whether it is something that you want to do, or feel right about. Jesus says, better to blend in and be yourself. You might actually get noticed and recognized, even invited to a place where others take note of your presence. But when you are invited, rather than trying to get yourself invited, you retain your inner freedom, you can continue to be who you are.

Earlier this summer when I was exercising one morning and listening to the radio, I heard a discussion about the efficacy of helping others get ahead in the business world. The research shows that persons who are altruistic and help others move ahead and advance within an organization and in their careers, rather than only watching out for themselves, do not hinder their own advancement. Stepping aside for another is not detrimental to one's own success even in the business world.

One of the guests on the program gave the example of the father of John Huntsman, one of the Republican presidential hopefuls during the 2012 primary. Huntsman's father, also named Jon, is a very successful and very wealthy business person. His impetus for going into business was not to make a lot of money for himself alone and gain status, but rather to be able to help others through philanthropy, especially to fund cancer research. The company, which began rather modestly manufacturing containers now employs 12,000 people and had revenues of more than \$11 billion in 2012. It turns out that in the year that Mr. Huntsman gave away the largest proportional amount of his wealth was the year that his businesses actually turned the greatest

profit. The organizational psychologist who was sharing this example, explained that the outcome was very possibly due to the fact that giving and sharing with others had such a positive effect that it caused Mr. Huntsman to work all the more energetically.

I share this story, not to promote a prosperity gospel, but as an example of one who went about doing business with a different outlook and set of goals than what we usually associate with “business as usual.” Mr. Huntsman was not trying to get noticed or make a name for himself particularly. He wanted to use his business acumen to positively benefit others and by doing so, in the spirit of the proverb, we hold him up.

In the second story, Jesus tells us that we all have the power, even the responsibility, to create experiences of community that aren't based on status. Rather than trying to angle our way into the cool group, showing favors to the already favored in hopes that they'll consider us one of their own, Jesus says: look around and notice who else might be feeling left out. Maybe it's the student whose family just came to the US from a refugee camp and she doesn't know English very well or the basics of how we do things in our culture. Or maybe it's the student with a physical disability who is often one of the last in line in the cafeteria or one who might need some assistance in getting on and off the school bus. Or maybe it's the one who isn't wearing new shoes or carrying a new backpack, who doesn't have a running chance of ever being cool. Jesus says, go sit at their table, or if you see someone wondering where to sit, invite them to your table. And if someone asks why you're doing this, you might say that you think it's what God wants us to do, or that we're all children of God.¹

And if this is important for our students in middle school, it's also important for each one of us...in our work place, in our neighborhoods. I had an experience this summer of receiving just this sort of invitation. I went to Central Plains Conference annual meeting in Montana knowing that some in our conference might not be happy to see me or those of us from Faith Mennonite. Each afternoon we got on tour buses to travel an hour or so to visit different parts of the Northern Cheyenne reservation and some of the sacred and historical sites of the Cheyenne people. On the second afternoon I was one of the last people to get on the bus and since the very first seats were open I took a seat, thinking that someone else might get on and join me, and that I'd have a good view of the scenery.

As it turned out, I was the last person on so I remained alone. But after a few moments, Becky Swora, from Emmanuel Mennonite Church, got up from her seat half-way back and came up to the front, and in front of everyone, said “Come on back, Joetta, we have a seat for you!” And she led me back, in sight of all, and sure enough, there was an open seat, across from her and Mathew, and next to Josias, from the Third Way community. They made a welcoming place for me on the bus that day. And Mathew and Becky did the same during several successive mealtimes in the cafeteria. Their welcome took away that uncomfortable feeling of wondering who might want or not want to sit with me. (And I should add here, that overall I—and I think the others from our Faith Mennonite delegation—did feel welcome from many while we were at annual meeting.)

In just a moment we will gather at the table—the Lord's table—the table that anticipates the ultimate feast in the kingdom of God, when people from all parts of the world and every age will gather as equals. No one is better than another; no one more deserving. We gather at the invitation of One who was never concerned about appearances, One who never worried about impressing, only about freeing people from whatever oppressed them, be it their own personal sin or short-coming, or the sin within the community that affected them. We gather because Jesus not only stepped aside, but laid down his very life out of love for each of us so that we might be members of a beloved community that seeks the best for one another, that offers forgiveness because we have received forgiveness.

¹ David Lose, “Working Preacher,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2719>