

HUMANIZE ME



Sometimes people say a public figure needs to be humanized. What could this mean except that there are things in this world that make us less than human? Jesus is on a mission to make you more human—the kind of human who looks more like the Son of God. This series tackles the forces that keep us from being just as human as God always intended us to be. And it leads us to discover that when we are humanized, we get to humanize others.

Who do you invite to the party? That can be a big question. If it's a wedding, it can be a \$100-a-head question sometimes. In junior high, that was a big question whenever birthdays came around. Drawing the circle of who to invite was hard. I remember one year my mom let me off the hook and said, just invite everybody. It will be hotdogs on the grill in the back yard. This sounded awesome to me, so I invited everybody. And, much to my surprise, as one of the non-popular kids, it sounded like everybody was coming. Time to grill some hotdogs. I went out and started the grill myself and laid hotdogs across every square inch of the grill. You might not know this, but that many hotdogs on a grill at once produces a lot of grease, and if you get enough grease going on a grill you can produce a lot of fire. Those flames got up there around five or six feet! My unpopular self hosted a popular party with lots of popular cool kids chewing on blackened hotdog jerky. Who do you invite? Everybody? If you have an invitation to give, give it. My mentor in ministry was a man named Jonathan Miller. He always said, "If you have it to give, then give it." For him this applied to a lot of different areas. If you have money to give, give it. If you have time to give, give it. If you have an encouragement or a positive word, give it. Just give it. This morning I hope you see something. You have dignity to give, so give it.

What is dignity? In this *Humanize Me* series, we are talking about how Jesus is the model for humanity. Jesus not only shows us who God is; He shows us who we are. Or who we are meant to be. He's what we want to imitate. The more I imitate Jesus, the more human I am. So, you could say, Jesus is out to humanize me. And humanized people get to humanize people. When Jesus restores us, or gets us on a path of restoration, we are more motivated and more able to help restore others. We get to be a part of removing obstacles and dehumanizing forces in other people's lives. So, what's dignity? Dignity is our sense of value and worth as human beings. When I have dignity, I respect myself and feel the respect of others. As Christians, we say dignity comes from being made in the image of God. Every person deserves dignity because every person carries the image of God. In fact, it's hard to make an argument for universal human dignity without God, but that's a sermon for another time. Today, I just want us to see that you and I, we have dignity to give. It is the easiest thing to

participate in destroying other people's dignity. Anybody who has been through high school knows what I'm talking about. It's the easiest thing to get on a bandwagon and start dehumanizing other people we don't like—"those people; those folks." It's easy to participate in indignities. But giving dignity is not that hard either. It really isn't that hard to give people dignity. You and I, we have dignity to give.

Let's look at Luke 14. Who gets the invite? Is it only people you expect to get something from in return? That's one way to go about it. I have a party, I have a gift to give. I want to make sure I use this wisely. I want to invite people who can propel me forward. If they owe me, they'll help me get on. Jesus has other plans. Sometimes, when you have a gift to give, it's better just to give it, and see what God unfolds. The passage starts with some practical wisdom. Jesus and his friends are invited to a prominent religious leader's home for dinner on the Sabbath. On the way, Jesus heals a man. Again we are faced with the Sabbath challenge. Jesus again points out that the Sabbath was made for healing, not as an inhumane torture. If you practice Sabbath in a way that lays pain on others, you're not practicing the Sabbath God intends. When He gets to the feast, He notices that people are jockeying for seats. People are elbowing one another out of the important spots. Not smart.

"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:8–11). Here's how this worked. People at banquets gathered on cushions on the floor around small tables, just off the ground. You lay down on your left elbow, keeping your right hand free to eat. The host was at the head of a u-shape and the places of honor descended down each side. If what Jesus described had happened, you imagine seeing someone come in late—it's a Congressman, or a movie star or

Jim D—and you'd have two choices. Either you make every single person in the room shuffle down and move their food, or you drop someone from up next to you all the way down to the service entrance to make a space for Jim. Either way, it's a hugely embarrassing, hugely disruptive moment. To be avoided.

Jesus' solution is simple. Go humbly. As Eugene Peterson voiced this verse in his Message Bible: "What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself." Good advice. Still, all of this sounds a little trite for Jesus. Jesus is not an advice giver. Jesus is not a fortune cookie, or a leadership guru for that matter. Could there be something deeper going on? Of course. Jesus sees people jockeying for attention and power and importance and all the stuff they foolishly think will satisfy them, and he knows we do the very same thing with God. We want to be more important, more loved, more valued by God than the next guy. But that's not what it means to be in relationship with God. His love is for each of us, not by comparison. Each heart is filled, each person addressed, by God's love. So Jesus takes us further.

Are you living in transactional relationships or loving relationships? Jesus tells another story to take us deeper: "Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid'" (Luke 14:12). Right. What's wrong with that? So many relationships are transactional relationships. I give you a bit because you might give me a bit in return. I help you, you help me. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. Transactional. What happens when I don't have anything to give? Suddenly I'm not interesting. I'm not valued. I'm not invited.

There's another way to go, says Jesus. Not transactional but transformational, love-based, giving, dignity-building. "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13–14). If you have it to give, give it. It might be more fun, more fulfilling, richer than business transaction relationships. It might feel more real, more kind, more

human. And, Jesus says, this is kind of what God is after. That's why He says, no matter what you feel or how you experience reward or a return or a sense of this or that, no matter what, when you give the gift you have to give, when you give the gift of dignity, God sees it. It warms God's heart. Your reward is somewhere in your relationship with God. Make sure you give some gifts that are never meant to pay off. Who do you want to invite?

I look at this story, and, as I said, I think of dignity. Jesus says, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Why? Well, because they can't be expected to return the favor you give. But more than that, they are people, human beings, who suffer indignity every day. You can give them a moment of dignity. A moment when they remember that they too, despite their challenges, were made in the image of God. That they too have value. That they too have gifts to give, different perhaps than the common gifts. They can offer their presence, their humor, their loving kindness, their wisdom. They can bring what they bring and know dignity. They can remember their worth to the mission of Jesus. They have a ministry, a mission, an errand of God, as each of us has, that is theirs and theirs alone to pursue. I think dignity is, at the heart of it, remembering that you are made in the image of God with unique gifts and abilities, and you are on a personal errand for Jesus. Dignity is knowing yourself as a child of the Most High. If you have dignity to give, give it. What is more humanizing than that?

We began this series with a list of poverties, from Peter Greer and Hope International. They asked people living on less than two dollars a day what the word "poverty" meant to them. They said things like: "(1) Poverty is an empty heart. (2) Not knowing your abilities and strengths. (3) Not being able to make progress. (4) Isolation. (5) No hope or belief in yourself. Knowing you can't take care of your family." Indignities. There is so much wisdom in a list like that. So much insight. I can't help but say I suffer the same things. Don't you? Wondering if you're making progress. Knowing you're not. Wondering if your kids will be better off than you. Not knowing your own gifts and abilities and the value they have to the world and those around you. Isolation. An empty heart. These things are not cured by money. They just aren't. But is there a different currency? Dignity. You have dignity to give. Give it.

First Pres partners with a house of dignity. It was started by Young Life back in the early 1970s to help at-risk teens find their value, find the image of God within them, and remember their dignity. It's called the Dale House. It's an important mission partner to us, if nothing else, because it brought a little 3-year old girl named Jennifer out here from Hollywood when her father came to start it—now our Executive Pastor Jennifer Holz. The Dale House Project is a Christian community of staff and residents committed to being together for meals, one-to-one talks, group sessions, work crew, recreation and outings like ski trips and camping. This is what makes it a home. Their residential program serve at-risk youth within the context of community living. Their goal is to teach youth the skills necessary to live independently while building healthy relationships. Dignity. If you have it to give, give it.

How can a man give without expecting to receive? How can a woman invite without expecting anything in return? How can we escape the transactional and move into the transformational? How can I pour out from my storehouse with no assurance of a return on investment? How? This is the gift of God. The feast where men jostled for attention, it was just a metaphor, an illustration. The feast is an illustration of the Kingdom of God, the great wedding feast of the King of Glory. There we have no need for jostling. We have all walked in without dignity, having suffered and believed all the indignities of the world that make us less than human. But when we walk in to that feast, there is no expectation of what we have to offer in return. Our place has been prepared and purchased. How can we give away our feast? Because the feast was never ours to begin with. We are all guests by grace.

Many of you know I was just in Israel with a large group from our church. I saw where Jesus ate His last meal with friends. I saw where He was stripped and beaten. I touched the stones of the Via Dolorosa where He carried His cross for us. Jesus took the lowest place, so you and I could sit in honor. Jesus laid all His dignity aside. He walked out into indignity, so you and I could stand, and be human ... and maybe reach out our hand and lift one more beside. Who will you invite to the party?

STUDY GUIDE

HUMANIZE ME • “Dignity”

Luke 14:7–14

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Luke 14:7–14.

- 1) Reread verse 8. Where are the places of honor in your life? Where is the place of honor at work (Corner office? A particular meeting?), home, social events, other circles you're in?
- 2) Reread verse 9. When have you seen someone humbled in this way? When have you seen someone in your life “knocked down a peg?”
- 3) Reread verses 10–11. How would you define humility? What does false humility look like? When is it easy or challenging for you to be humble?
- 4) Reread verses 12–14. It seems that Jesus is discouraging jockeying for social status, trying to get close to people in order to make yourself look good, or to get your foot in the door in a higher social circle. What do you think about His words here? Is this realistic in today's world?
- 5) Do you think Jesus' challenge to celebrate and share meals with the “least of these” in our society is still relevant today? Why or why not?
- 6) In what ways might this passage challenge you to think differently about what it means to be human?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

We can dehumanize by causing even honorable people to suffer indignity. We can humanize by causing even humble people to feel dignity. Spend a few minutes brainstorming. How might you participate in dignifying people in your life who have been stripped of this?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Think of someone you know who has been stripped of their dignity in the last few weeks. Close this time by praying for that person.