

“Seats of Honor in the Kingdom of God”  
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Luke 14:1, 8-14

A bishop went into the cathedral to pray. He knelt before the altar and prayed, “O God, I am nothing! I am nothing!” Soon, a priest came in and saw the bishop praying, so he also knelt at the altar and prayed, “O God, I am nothing! I am nothing!” A few minutes later, the custodian came in and saw the two clergy praying, so he too knelt at the altar and prayed, “O God, I am nothing! I am nothing!” The bishop nudged the priest and said, “Get a load of who thinks he is nothing.”

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about humility, and not a *false* humility, like our fictitious bishop and priest did. I have to admit, though, that it seems like a strange lesson that Jesus is teaching. It sounds like he is a first-century Miss Manners, doling out etiquette advice to those who have the occasion to attend fancy dinners. Why is this something that the Son of God is concerning himself with? We all know the virtue of being humble, which the dictionary defines as “not proud or haughty; not arrogant or assertive.” That’s all well and good, but is it really something worth Jesus’ time? Is it something worth me *preaching* about? Perhaps the lesson for those of Jesus’ day comes in looking at another definition of humble, which also is defined as “ranking low in a hierarchy or scale; insignificant.” The people attending wedding banquets in Jesus’ day *certainly* did not want to rank low in hierarchy or to be insignificant. Social status was hugely important in those days, defining one’s existence clearly and resonating in all aspects of one’s life. Cultural activities were all about *exalting* oneself, and Jesus told them that they should instead *humble* themselves. Instead of taking the seat of honor, they should take the lowest seat. Going back to that dictionary definition, they should make themselves *insignificant*. That was

certainly not something that they were prepared to do. Once again, Jesus is poking his nose into their business, doing his best to upset social norms that benefitted the wealthy and powerful.

But there's more to this story than just where to seat yourself at a party. Luke introduced Jesus' statements with the phrase "he told them a parable." Since we know that this is a parable, we should not just take it at face value. There is a higher meaning to the story, as well. Given that intro, we can see that Jesus is really talking about the kingdom of God. Those gathered at that particular meal were not just the powerful of the *current* age. They were inclined to see themselves as more worthy of the kingdom of God than others. These were the Pharisees and other religious leaders. They were obviously the religious big-wigs. They knew the law frontwards and backwards. Surely, *they* were first in line for the kingdom of God. Jesus told them that's not the way it works. In God's kingdom, we don't push to get to the front of the line; we are to move to the back of the line. Jesus told us in Matthew 19, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." In verse 11 of today's lesson, we get to the heart of the matter: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The thing to remember is that all of the seats in the kingdom of God are seats of honor. There really should be no jockeying for position.

And that is a lesson that applies just as well to us as it did to the Pharisees. If we are honest, we must admit that we, too, live in a society defined by social standing. Celebrities get first dibs on everything, going to the fanciest of parties, and given countless accolades. And we fit right into that system, gawking at news reports of what celebrity has done what this week, willingly paying large amounts of money to attend movies or concerts or sporting events, wearing fashions because someone famous says they are what is in. We put celebrities on a pedestal, and therefore *we* must be somewhat *lower* than they are. We freely situate ourselves in the pecking order of *our* day. Of course, social standing is not just on a wide scale. We have the social standing of our local communities, as well. There are the events at which *we* are the ones who sit in the places of honor.

We must not place others on pedestals, but we also must not place *ourselves* on pedestals. Jesus calls us to humility.

We have to be careful about humility, though. This doesn't become a rush to see just who can get to the back of the line first. This isn't a fight for *last* place. This isn't a demeaning of ourselves or self-deprecation. As the saying goes, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less." We are not to be overly concerned with our position in this earthly life. In other words, we are not to be trying to push to the *front* of the line and we are not to be trying to push to the *back* of the line. We are to live in humility, knowing that all that we have, and all that we are, is a gift from God. We are to remember that we all have a place of honor in God's kingdom, and then think of others first.

When we gather here for worship, are we thinking mainly about ourselves and what *we* can get out of worship? Are we more concerned about what God can do for *us* than about sharing the blessings of God with others? We are not here to be entertained. We are here to be challenged and strengthened by the Word of God read, sung and proclaimed. At that is true for each of us, no matter where our society places us in its lists of least and greatest.

When the funeral procession of the emperor Charlemagne approached the cathedral with much pomp and ceremony, the gate was barred by the local bishop. "Who comes?" shouted the bishop. The proud herald shouted out "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire!" The bishop replied, "Him I know not! Who comes?" The herald was not a bit shaken and he answered "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth!" Again the bishop answered, "Him I know not. Who comes?" By now, the herald is quite frustrated and he says "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ." Immediately, the bishop replied "Him I know. Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

While all of us are precious and loved by God, none of us is fully worthy of the gifts of God. Not the Pharisees, not Mother Theresa, not you or me. We all must bow down before God in *true*

humility and ask for God's grace. We must not think less of ourselves, but we must think of ourselves less.

Jesus tells us just how we do that. After telling the guests at the party how to behave, he then turns his attention to the host. He says that, when we throw a party, we shouldn't invite our family and friends or rich people. We should instead invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." This is a shocking statement to us, but it was more so to Jesus' initial audience. In those days, one did things only for those who could repay them equally. Thus, if you threw a dinner party, you invited only your peers. You invited those of equal social stature who could easily invite you to their own parties. When they attended your party, there was now a social imbalance. They now owed you something in return and you could expect repayment in a timely manner.

But, in that society, what could "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" repay their hosts? Most likely nothing. You did not invite such people to your dinners, because they had no hope of repaying you. Inviting them only lowered your *own* standing.

A few years ago, I overheard a discussion in which two people were talking about a wedding that would be taking place in the coming months. As the bride-to-be told her friend where the wedding would be held, the friend began to say what a bad area of town that was and what kind of people might just walk up to the wedding. The bride replied that there would be no such problems, because she would have security working the wedding to keep out all the undesirables.

Jesus explicitly welcomes the undesirables. A few verses down from where our gospel reading ended today, Jesus tells another parable. This one is about a feast that is prepared and the ones who are invited are the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. The servant is commanded to go out into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in all who are in need. Jesus is inviting those who we generally won't give a second glance to. Are we there, welcoming them

with Jesus, or are we telling them with our lives, “No, we don’t *really* want your type here”? Are we leading lives that invite others to Christ, especially those who have nothing to offer us in return?

Jesus calls us to lives of humility. Not to think less of ourselves – we are all beloved children of God and we are more than welcome at the feast of our Lord – but we are to think of ourselves less. We are to think of those that were always on the mind of Jesus and we are to go out into the streets and lanes and bring them in. There is always room for more at the feast of our Lord and it is up to us to invite those who are in need to join us in worship of God. May we do so with joy and gladness. Amen.