

Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body in Christ, Belonging to Each Other.

Pentecost XII

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In today's gospel, Jesus was on his way to a Pharisee's house for a Sabbath meal. As he made his way, people curiously watched him. They were interested about the kind of guest Jesus would be. Will he sit at the place of honor? Will he position himself as a socialite like Kim Kardashian? What kind of guest is he going to be?

Conventionally, the place one sits at the table determines how important they are. People therefore jockeyed for positions of prominence at the table. And so for those looking at Jesus walk into the home of the Pharisee, the question was, what kind of guest is he going to be? Where will he sit?

When Jesus arrived, he watched guests choose places of honor. He used that spectacle as a teachable moment-and told a parable about humility-the kind of humility that invites affirmation from others. More importantly, he taught about gracious giving, that kind of giving that expects nothing in return, that kind of giving that is fulfilling in itself. That kind of giving which is godly because it comes from a place of abundance and humility. The kind of giving that humbles you and makes you appreciate the place of God in your life. The kind of giving that invites us into a life-giving relationship with God.

This past week, Christ Church witnessed the completion of a six week SAT summer camp for 19 students at Oakland Mills High School. The students took their test yesterday. We raised over \$6000.00 to support 125 students at Lake Elkhorn Middle School with school supplies. A few weeks ago, representatives from Saint Luke's Youth Center worshipped with us. One of them was a young man. The CEO sent Patricia an email on Monday that Ty is going to college, had gotten all that he needed but a promised bicycle fell through. Her prayer was if Patricia could get Ty a bicycle by Friday.

Sometimes we don't necessarily believe that God works in mysterious ways. But I want you to believe that God does work in mysterious ways to accomplish his purposes in our lives. According to Patricia, one thing led to another and by Friday, she delivered a bicycle to Ty. Not only that, she also got him a helmet. Patricia, like all of you seated here or watching online, do not expect to be paid back by Ty or any of the students. But that in itself hasn't stopped you from being gracious with your giving.

Some of the questions of our refugee family are: what drives you to serve? From which well are you drawing the desire to be hospitable? What makes you want to give graciously? What's in it for them? They know that your service, giving and hospitality doesn't come from a place of pride because pride makes it impossible to fully serve or fully give off yourself. And so with any interaction, you get a sense of their response of gratitude wrapped in humility.

The point here is that any act of gracious giving or any act of gracious invitation-should place less of a burden on the recipient. The recipient has to feel no obligation to offer the same in return. The recipient has only to express that deep sense of gratitude which flows out of humility. This is because it is out of humility that the giver recognizes that he or she has also received graciously from God. It is out of humility that those who feel God's invitation embrace the idea that in spite of who they are, they have also been graciously invited to God's banquet table. And at that table, it doesn't matter who you are, where you are, where you have been nor is your status of any relevance. God's banquet table is open and it is about the hospitality of the humble and the humility of the hospitable.

The tragedy is pride makes it impossible for us to appreciate any place at the table. We either feel we're more deserving or others are less deserving. We feel that God's grace is not sufficient enough for each of us to get a piece. But listen, God assures us with these words, my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

I used to mentor an incarcerated African-American teenage boy in Columbia, SC. When I first drove through the prison gates to meet the inmate, I felt like being a captive. Our first meeting was more introductory. We sat around a table facing each other and simply talked. I learned so much about him, who he was, his family and the circumstances under which he found himself in prison. He's been at the prison before. He's seen more than enough of his share of life's trials.

Within me flowed a river of uncontrollable tears. I couldn't believe that such a young boy could endure so much. We settled on getting together every Friday afternoon. And before I departed, he asked that I bring him a burger from McDonalds. I asked, which kind? "Big Mac" He responded. I made it a point to bring him a Big Mac meal from McDonalds every Friday.

Each visit was filled with fear because I felt that out of ignorance I could say something stupid or be judgmental. Worse still, because we really had nothing in common our time will be filled with silence.

But there was always something to talk about as we sat at the metal round table and watched him munch down the Big Mac and fries and then guzzle down the coca cola. It was as if that was the only meal he's had the entire week. I didn't offer him the world, all I offered was something which I believe meant more than the world to him-hearing his story, helping him to understand that someone-a stranger values him, and that if the world does judge him for what he's done, I am in no position to judge him. I am humble enough to recognize that my place at that table is made possible because he chooses to have me at the table.

I always felt a sense of gratitude around the metal table. It was the kind of gratitude that comes from the place of humility-that this young prisoner has lifted me up and put me in a place of honor in his life. I was keenly aware that my place at the table was only guaranteed because he chose to spend time with me. He didn't need me at the table. I was the one who needed him, after all, to love is to have an object of that love. He, was the object of my love, and it was important to know my place in that relationship-it was a place of honor that he gave me. He expected big mac from me, but I expected nothing in return. I felt fulfilled every Friday. He gave me more than I could ever give him. But I couldn't give him anything from the place of pride.

Sirach reminds us that pride was not created for human beings, because to be human is to embrace the power and grace of humility.

It takes the Ty's in our lives. It takes the students at Lake Elkhorn and Oakland Mills in our lives. It takes the prisoners and refugees in our lives. It takes those on the margins in our lives to remind us of the depth of humility and gratitude we should feel.

Today's parable presents a response to the dawning of God's reign-God's wedding feast. At God's feast, carefully contrived rankings and distinctions of honor are undermined and overthrown. Listen to Mary, God He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. Those who depend upon trappings of social rank and status to perpetuate their standing will find that matters of rank are turned upside down. God's reign is not for those who claim status at the table, it is for those who have no claim at the table, it is for those who are humble enough to depend on God's grace, it is for those humble enough to appreciate that they, like everyone else, are human.

The parable is not to encourage a kind of humility that seems to suggest that we are unworthy at the table. Rather, it provides us with a window to see a glimpse of God's reign, and the privilege of such sight is to abandon all pretensions of worthiness-worthiness which simply comes out of pride.

Remember my prisoner friend? Yes, I didn't offer him the world. Beyond the Big Mac, all I offered was my presence at the table as equals. Remember Ty? All Patricia offered was a bicycle. These acts weren't meant to garner any reciprocity-we don't give with the hope of receiving something in return. My gift was meant to affirm both our place at God's table and to assure him that God's equal pronouncement upon us comes out of His divine grace alone.

For this reason, we cannot keep account of our merits before God-as if we can accumulate reserves of extra merit that would obligate God to us. A citizen of God's heaven knows that a seat at the table is a mark of God's unprecedented outpouring of grace. It is not a mark of attainment-for a feeling of attainment only generates pride.

St. Augustine writes this "I was inflated with self-esteem, which made me think myself a great man." Great you may be, but humble must you be, and here in God's house, at God's table, we welcome all who are humble, we welcome gracious givers and we welcome all who depend on God's grace alone. Welcome home. Amen.