

Pentecost 12 / August 28, 2022

Luke 14:11

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

If you have ever held a banquet, you know that apart from the food, one of the most important parts of planning is the seating arrangement. Who will be seated at the head table, who will sit beside who and the order in which they are seated, are important. If divergent groups with strong opinions are invited, you might want to ensure they are seated far apart. You may want to ensure people are not seated with guests they do not know. You may want to balance talkers with listeners. You might want to put spark plugs at certain tables to break the ice and help people become acquainted. You might want to keep certain people apart, so quarrels don't break out. But if you are mischievous, you might want to put certain people together to stir the pot.

Jesus attended a dinner hosted by a prominent Pharisee. At the start of the banquet a man presented himself for healing. It was a Sabbath and Jesus first asked the assembled Pharisees, if it were lawful to heal on the Sabbath. There was an awkward silence. They wanted the most prestigious seats, but they weren't prepared to risk their prestige, by giving an opinion on a controversial question. Jesus wasn't afraid of controversy, or to offer an opinion. He healed the man. They remained silent. They remained silent throughout Jesus' words, which concludes with Him saying that rather than throwing banquets for their personal glory and inviting their well to do friends that they should “invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind.” They wouldn't receive a return on their favour in time, but they would be blessed by God in eternity.

Luke says the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. He watched them too. He observed how they sought the most prestigious seats. He offered them some sage advice. He said that if they really wanted to look important before the other guests, they should choose the lowest seat and wait for the host to honour them, by bringing them to a better place. They would have the added pleasure of seeing someone else humiliated, by being asked to move to a lower place. In which case, they could give their rival a smug sneer as they crossed paths on the way to their respective places. People speculate as to the nature of Jesus' words. Was He giving serious advice on how to get ourselves honoured at public gatherings, or was He needling the Pharisees for their pride and pointing the same out in us. I think He was needling them for their pride, saying ‘if you're going to exalt yourself at the expense of others, then this is the best way to do it.’ But that's not His point. That's pride using humility for its own glory. He is speaking about true humility before God and others. “The one who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” He is the perfect expression of true humility. No one humbled Himself more than Jesus. He set aside His glory as the eternal Son of God, to join us in our humanity. He did this not for Himself, but for us, so through the humility of His cross, we would receive the gift of forgiveness for our sin and be exalted as children of God.

Much of Jesus' interaction with Pharisee's occurred at dinner. They found fault with His teachings. They claimed He did miracles by the power of the devil. They condemned Him to death, but they still wanted Him to come for dinner. But of course, it was not a matter of respect. They had an ulterior motive. They wanted to catch Him in something He said or did, as in the case of the man who came for healing at the start of our gospel. Banquets were used by enemies to catch the unwary off guard. Proverbs 23:2 offers guidance for those dining with powerful people, lest they unwittingly become the main course, saying, “When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.” Banquets were fraught with danger. In the Old Testament a man named Naboth was invited to a banquet, only to be ambushed with false accusations and executed.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, a Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with Him. A woman with a notorious reputation entered the room. She began to weep and to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. The Pharisee judged Jesus, thinking to Himself, “If this man were a prophet, He would know what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” A few chapters later, another Pharisee asked Jesus to dine with him. This Pharisee also judged Him, astonished that Jesus did not follow their elaborate rules for ritual washing. Dining with Pharisees was fraught with danger. There were as many knives behind backs as there were on the table. If Jesus were not the embodiment of divine wisdom, He would have succumbed to their intrigues much sooner than He did. In our gospel Jesus identifies pride as their chief sin, theirs and ours. We are all prone to pride, exalting ourselves over others. There may be people higher than us, but thank God there are always people lower than us. But Jesus says, “The one who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Banquets can be fraught with danger, but the most dangerous place is our hearts. One of the most common places in which we exalt ourselves over others is in our hearts, thinking we are better than others, judging others as worse than ourselves. The first Pharisee thought He was much better than the woman with a bad reputation, because he was not like her. He also thought He was better than Jesus, because Jesus did not discern her bad character. Jesus didn't defend her character; He knew her sins. But He said she was better off than the Pharisee, not because she had lesser sin, but because she saw her sin and came to Him in repentance. The Pharisee may have had a better moral character, but he was worse off than the woman. He saw no sin in himself and so received no forgiveness. She saw her sin and she was forgiven. "The one who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

The second Pharisee had a similar problem. He could recognize dirt on eating utensils and sin in other people's lives, but he could not see sin in his own heart. In God's eyes we are all equal in our sin. As St. Paul the Pharisee said in the letter to the Romans, "No one is righteous... We all sin and fall short of the glory of God." No matter who we are and what we are in comparison to others, we are all in need of God's forgiveness, which He offers to all and gives freely to everyone who come to Him in the humility of repentance, through faith in Christ Jesus. All who exalt themselves before God and over other people, will be humbled. All who humble themselves in repentance beneath the cross of Jesus are forgiven, raised up as God's children and promised a seat at the greatest banquet, in the kingdom of God. "The one who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

When the Pharisees gave banquets, they invited their friends and prominent citizens, to impress them with lavish provisions. They gave invitations in the expectation that their guests would invite them to their banquets. God will hold a banquet when Christ returns and makes all things new. It will be the greatest banquet of all. The best of meats and the finest of wines will be served. God is making a guest list and sending invitations. But God, doesn't make His guest list in the manner of humans. As Jesus advised the Pharisees, God invites the poor in spirit, those disabled and dead in their sins. He calls all who live in the darkness of sin to see His mercy in the face of Jesus and to receive Him as their Saviour.

He calls us to see our sins. He calls us to humble ourselves beneath the cross of Jesus. He invites us to confess our sins and hear His word of forgiveness, promised always in our baptism, spoken in absolution. He invites us to His table to receive a foretaste of the banquet to come in the bread and wine of Holy communion. Through this foretaste of the feast to come He forgives our sins and nourishes our spirits with Christ's holy body and precious blood. We come in the humility of repentance that He may raise us up in forgiveness. We come to His banquet table that He might bless us with His Spirit, encourage our faith and give us assurance of our reservation at the greatest banquet to come in the kingdom of God.

God bless us always to come to Him in the humility of faith in Christ Jesus God grant that we may abide in His grace until the day of Christ Jesus and feast with Him in paradise. In Jesus' Name Amen.