

September 1, 2019

In today's Gospel we see Jesus eating at the home of an important Pharisee and watching how the guests behave. Each seeks out the best place; the places of honor at the table where they can be noticed by the other guests and, by their proximity to their host, be served first and receive the best portions that the table offers.

Here's what Jesus has to say about what he observed going on;

"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 man 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 your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

We could say that the theme of this lesson is humility.

We are challenged to see that all are called to a place at the table of the Lord; not just those who we might think should be there. We are called to humbly allow God, our host at this feast, to arrange the seating chart. We are called to recognize that every seat at God's table is a good seat, a seat that allows us to receive the fullness of God's blessing, the fullness of what God promises to all who respond to his invitation to come to him.

Sometimes I think we don't understand humility. Sometimes I think being humble means that I need to beat myself up; tell myself what a rotten, no-good scoundrel I am...profess to God that I am a worm and no man. Is that humility? I don't think so.

Here's a definition of humility offered by Alcoholics Anonymous:
Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less."

If we think of ourselves less; if we set aside the personal cares and concerns we bring with us this morning, who would be the best candidates to be our guests of honor at this morning's feast?

Consider the children we baptize here at St. Stephen's. They have minimal understanding of what we are doing. They have no intellectual understanding, no beliefs, regarding God, or Jesus or the Church. Yet, once they are baptized, they will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever. They become members in the household of God.

And, once those children are baptized, they are full members of this Church. There is nothing else they have to do. They have all the rights and all the privileges of every other Christian. Sometimes I hear folks say, "the children are the future of the Church." That statement always makes me uncomfortable. The children are the Church, right now! And they need to be treated that way; they need to be treated as the precious treasures that they are.

So, today, the seats of honor at this banquet belong to the youngest among us, just as much as the oldest among us. Who else is included in God's seating chart?

Jesus said, "*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.*"

I have quoted to you before the words of Archbishop William Temple, who said "The Church is the only institution that exists to serve those outside the institution." The Church is about mission. The Church is about equipping the saints for ministry, and then sending those saints beyond the walls of the Church to be the healings hands of Christ in the world today.

The following story is from *The Presbyterian Journal* back in 1941:

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude, little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there as only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little life-saving station. So it became famous.

Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and their money and their effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, and new life-saving crews were trained, and the little life-saving station grew. Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully, and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations. About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin.

The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant, and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose, and pointed out they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast a little ways, which they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old one. It evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

Are we still a life guard station here at St. Stephen's? Or are we in danger of becoming a country club?

Let's remember that definition; Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.

My own experience of this parish is that it does indeed function in many ways as a life guard station. I see you express deep love for one another. I am sure that most of you are praying for the needs of those seated next to you: those that you have known for a long time - and those whom you have known for a short time.

This morning I'm simply trying to stretch us all a bit, to help us think about ourselves a little less. We need to always keep in mind our mission to those who are not here today.

Are we praying that those outside this place may find their way inside? Is our desire that they may come in and feel welcomed and comfortable, even if they take our seat in our favorite pew? We exist not only for ourselves, but for the stranger and for the children, who are also members of this household of God. They have a place at God's table. God offers them the same food, the same grace, the same love, the same hope, that we receive.

Inviting the stranger to join us involves a risk; the risk of discomfort. The risk that this house of God is so filled that every week we may have to sit in different spot every Sunday because this Church is so crowded! If we fulfill our mission, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ with our every word and our every deed to a world hungry for spiritual sustenance, those who hunger will hear God's call; and will join us in the feast!

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we all come equal before God, sinners in need of salvation, beggars in need of bread, strangers who someone at sometime welcomed into this place.

This morning I'm asking you to take an extra step; to notice the empty places among us today; places that will be only filled if you allow God to issue an invitation through you to those, who like you, are in need of God's healing love. This morning I'm asking you not to think less of yourselves; This morning, I'm asking you to think of yourselves less.

Remember the rest of the human family and pray that God will use you and that God will use me and that God will use each one of us here today to invite others to come in and to receive the life that is to be found in the bread and the wine, the life that Christ came to give to all who would receive it.