

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time – 2022C

At first blush, it appears that Jesus has good manners on his mind. It would seem that Jesus is Mr. Manners, a masculine version of Emily Post and Martha Stewart. We see him here giving seating instructions at a dinner party. His advice helps the guests not only to avoid humiliation, but to practice humility, and in the process, snatch some honor for themselves. First, sit at the lowest place (farthest from the host table), he recommends, so that you might be exalted and honored - rather than seeking the highest place and risk being moved for someone more important.

This might be read as "Don't honor yourself more than others do" or "Let the host shower you with public admiration by leading you to a better seat." Jesus summarizes his etiquette advice in this way, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

It's the overstuffed ego, the too-big-for-the-britches self-image, the "I am better, I deserve it," the this-is-mine-and-I-am-going-to-take-it attitude that rubs Jesus the wrong way.

Remember where he is, and who he's with, when he comments. Jesus is in a crowd of Pharisees, of good, upstanding, religious men, of saintly holy folks who jostle and elbow their way, figuratively maybe, to the highest place possible, so that they might look good in the eyes of men, and in their own eyes too. They do more than aspire to a seat of honor, they seize it - because it is a place of respect, a place of power, a spot from where one makes judgments of others, and of one's self. But if one can't correctly judge one's

own place in the order of the world, how can one be expected to properly judge others?

From Jesus' point of view, what we think about others matters less than what God thinks of us. In part, how we think of ourselves influences how God sees us, but often in reverse. If we see ourselves as high and mighty, God sees us as shadowy, lowly. If we see ourselves as humble persons, chances are God's impression of us is still much the same. Humility is an elusive virtue; it cannot be manufactured. Rather, it emerges from the crucible of character. Humility is naively unaware; the moment the robe of humility becomes self-conscious, the sash loosens, revealing nothing but buck-naked pride. A wise man once said that humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less. That's what both Sirach and Jesus tell us in today's readings. Humility helps take the spotlight off ourselves. And when we stop putting ourselves first, we become more open to the people around us.

Jesus' advice is actually pragmatic: You want to be honored? This is how to do it. There are certain behaviors, he notes, that can at the very least, give the appearance of humility. Unfortunately, the person who seeks the obscure seat in the hope of being elevated to a prominent one is just as proud as those who seek the best seat to begin with. Humility, then, doesn't have anything to do with one's actual position in the world. A humble CEO is just as holy as a humble farmer. And an egocentric, power-grabbing, selfish farmer is just as rotten as an egotistical CEO.

Perhaps we are tempted to think that a humble person is someone who lets other people walk all over them. And who wants

to be like that? The truth is, true humility requires great strength. Choosing to put other people ahead of ourself goes against a lot of ingrained habits and self-interest. But it will make us free to love the people around us.

There is an ancient story from the back country of Egypt in the 3rd century about a certain holy Christian, known by all to live a saintly life. One day he was seen walking, carrying a large sack over his shoulder. The sack had a tear in the bottom corner through which spilt grains of sand. When asked why he allowed the sand to spill, this humble holy man replied, "Those are my sins which trail out behind me in life." The story is meant to teach that the humble and holy are those who are aware, not of their good deeds, but of their glaring weaknesses.

Jesus once said not to pay so much attention to the outside of the cup - pay more attention to the inside. It's the insides that matter to God. How we really are on the inside always comes out, it spills out behind us.

So Jesus wasn't only observing and commenting on proper dinner-party seating arrangements and guest behavior while dining with the Pharisees. This wasn't mere etiquette - although his point in this regard is well taken, too. More significantly, Jesus made spiritual observations about us. About you and me. If we, as Christians, honestly put others before ourselves, we will be honored - not just by each other, but by God.

A little humility goes a long way in heaven, and on earth.