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Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2014

“Lowest Seat at the Feast”

(Lk. 14:7-11)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person, and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Lk. 14:7-11)

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Jesus is dining at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. This is not a poor man. He lives in a nice home, filled with fine furnishings. It's going to be an elegant meal for sure. And one doesn't become ruler of the Pharisees without being somewhat polished and sophisticated. His invitation to Jesus was not intended as an act of kindness, though he might have given that impression. The text says the ruler of the Pharisees and his friends have invited Jesus so they could watch him carefully (14:1). Their intention is not to learn anything from the Word Incarnate. Their intention is to scrutinize his every word. They're watching him carefully because their ultimate aim is to discredit Jesus and undermine him and they believe it's just a matter of time. Keep him talking, keep refilling his cup and sooner or later he'll stumble. Sooner or later in an unguarded moment he'll say something so outlandish and blasphemous that not even he can recover from it. Sooner or later they'll have something rock solid on which to press formal charges. On the surface the conversation is pleasant and polite. An elegant meal is about to be served. But make no mistake: they are out for blood.

As it turns out, they're not the only ones paying attention. Jesus too is watching. He knows their game.

Dinner is announced. The men make their way to the room where there are probably low-lying couches

arrange in the shape of a U. There's a very low table in the center. Jesus notices how the men chose the places of honor for themselves. In that culture and at that time there were well defined rules about where the seats of honor were. They're in the home of a ruler of the Pharisees, a position of some prestige and authority. Everybody wants to be sitting close to him. To be sure, it's not a mad dash for those seats. It's not jostling at the trough. But there's a lot of maneuvering going on. There's an art to this, you know. You've got to look casual about it, as if it really doesn't matter where you sit. But so long as you happen to be standing here where the host will soon be seated, you might as well casually set your cup down while in conversation and stake your claim. If you do it right it looks unplanned and spontaneous.

First century Greek historian Plutarch said that it is in the small, almost trivial acts that our true character is most revealed. It's not the heroic deeds that define who we are, but the small, everyday decisions. Maybe that's why Jesus is paying attention to how they chose their seats.

My goodness these Pharisees are ambitious, aren't they . . . looking for every little advantage in life. Their piety is lapped by their ambition. Tongue in cheek, Jesus tells the Pharisees they ought to be careful about this, for in choosing the places of honor they just might overshoot. They might prove themselves presumptuous. Someone more important to the host might be in attendance in which case they will be asked to pick up and move on down to where the common herd is seated. And how painfully embarrassing would that be!?

You see what Jesus is doing here? He's stooping to the level of these Pharisees and saying, "Everyone knows what you want most is honor and glory. So here's your strategy: Pretend to be humble and go in and sit in the lowest place possible. Surely the host will notice your false humility and call you up to a better

seat. And what a glorious stroll that will be! You can prance. Work it! And you'll be honored in front of everyone!

Now, Luke introduces this as a parable, but it doesn't seem to be a parable just yet. It's a description about a real dinner party that took place with a few stinging words about table etiquette. But there's one more verse that turns the whole account also into a parable. Verse 11: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Suddenly, this is more than just about table manners. This is about life and salvation.

"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled." How do we do that? How do we exalt ourselves? There are probably lots of ways, but here's one: We exalt ourselves when we measure ourselves against others, particularly other sinners. "I know I have my faults" we say to ourselves, "but at least I'm not as bad as that schmuck." On the outside, we pretend to be saddened by the public sin of another, while on the inside there's a little self-righteous satisfaction. And here's the danger. When we measure ourselves against other sinners, we feel smug and superior, and when we're smug and superior, we feel no need for forgiveness, and when we feel no need for forgiveness, we also feel no need for a savior. That is, self-righteousness excludes us from God and his gifts of forgiveness and salvation. So when we measure ourselves against other sinners, it turns out we're the ones then who are wallowing in our own sin and filth, even while thinking ourselves to be good, upstanding and decent. Do you see how easily we can become just like the Pharisees? One false, proud look at the "sinners and tax collectors" among us can spoil everything and turn away the grace of God.

In contrast, those who are truly humble measure themselves not against others, but against God, and God's commands and God's perfection. They compare their lives against God's holy Law and they find themselves wanting, repeatedly falling short. They're

not pretending to be humble. They're begging for forgiveness because they know their eternal welfare is on the line. When it's time to repent, what others are doing and have done is completely irrelevant to them. God himself is the standard. "Be perfect" Jesus said, "as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48).

Remember the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee in the temple, making a big show of his piety. He stood up and held his hands high and said, "God I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers . . . I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." Let's not be too quick to dismiss this guy. He puts his money where his mouth is. As the bumper sticker says, "Tithe if you love God. Any darn fool can honk." Meanwhile, there's a tax collector standing far off, who would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" Of the two, it's only the tax collector, Jesus said, that went home forgiven and acceptable before God (Lk. 18:9-14).

Friends, when it's time to repent (and that's a daily activity, right?) you look upward. The question is not, "Am I as good as others?" The question is, "Am I as good as God?"

And it's not enough to pretend to be humble. True humility is never pretended. True humility is never even aware of itself. So if true humility is not something that we can fake, how then do we become truly humble? It's simple really: just look at the facts of your life.

"Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments" Luther wrote. "Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?" (SC p. 214). And if that's still not enough to convict you, put a hand on your bosom, Luther wrote, and check to see if you're still made of flesh and blood.

When we humble ourselves by considering our place in life against the Ten Commandments, when we measure ourselves up against God and the standards he set for us, then we know our sin and it is always before us. We realize our desperate condition and we crave forgiveness, and the Savior who came to earn it for us. That's not the pretend kind of humility that is aiming for a seat of honor at a dinner party. It is true humility that yearns for forgiveness. And does that not harmonize beautifully with salvation by grace alone?

In Romans 3 Paul says, "The righteousness of God . . . [is given to] all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a *gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 22). He continues: "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded." That is, there's no more room for boasting in a Christian's life. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

The Pharisees were so ambitious, so ambitious to earn their way into favor before other men and before God. But their ambition was only getting in the way of salvation by grace. Therefore Jesus said, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." It is God who humbles and it is God who exalts, and we know God simply cannot ignore a contrite and humble heart. Proverbs 18 says "For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down" (v. 27). And James wrote, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jm. 4:6). When God gives grace to the humble, they are exalted.

Remember the prodigal son how he was hanging his head coming home. Remember how his father exalted him . . . ran to embrace him, ordered gifts be given him, ordered the fattened calf to be slaughtered? Remember how the father forgave him and restored him and exalted him as a son again and not a servant?

Today God still exalts the humble. In Holy

Baptism He washes us of the filth of our sin and gives Christ's own righteousness to us. He will raise us from the dead and lift up on eagle's wings. He exalt the humble all the way into the Father's house, the King's banquet, the never ending Feast. At that table, all are seated in a place of honor. There are no lowly or undesirable seats at that table.

So if we are to boast, let us boast in the Lord. If we are to be ambitious, let us be ambitious in his name and for his sake. And if we are to be presumptuous, let us presume only to have a kind and generous Savior whose death and forgiveness gives us life and salvation and a seat at His table in heaven. Amen.

