

Not Just About Banquets

Reading today's Gospel reading, one could get a sense of relief. Not many people attend fancy, black-tie dinners where there are many dignitaries and important and famous people present. Besides, if one happens to get invited to a stately banquet, there are usually seating assignments made so that the situation that Jesus describes in the text can be avoided. Perhaps Jesus was making a commentary on how well the Pharisees who were invited to this dinner followed or not followed the Scripture reading from Proverbs 25, verses 6 and 7 which reads: **"Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."** Since many of us do not rub elbows with kings and royalty, we could feel that we are off the hook for having to look at these verses very hard.

However, as with most things that Jesus talks about, He uses familiar examples to teach us about universal truths, things that apply to all people. As I have mentioned when looking at a text from the Synoptic Gospels, we need to learn to hear the words of Jesus in the same manner as we hear them in John's Gospel account - that is we look for the different layers that Jesus is talking about. By looking a little deeper into this text, looking at the layers of what Jesus is teaching us, by going beyond the literal understanding of what Jesus is saying, then we can see that this text does apply to us and not just when we go to a banquet or decide to host a dinner for our friends.

When we look at the motivation behind those looking for the better seats at the banquet, whether it is to be first through the buffet line or sit with all the 'real' important people, or think that we are important ourselves, we see that it is from selfish ambitions. In sitting at the important people's table, we see ourselves

as being above or more important than other people. We look at our accomplishments and position and decide that we are more important than someone else. This can be applied to any situation, any set of circumstances. For example, in a grocery store where the express checkout lane limits the number of items one can purchase, are there that many people who cannot count or read, or had been told to go to that line? How many of those with many more than the limit actually think that they are more important than others or their time is that important that they have to go in the express lane? When people feel that they are entitled to special treatment 'just because,' then they are acting like the people who are trying to sit in the seats of honor in today's Gospel reading.

This concept of entitlement has been expanded recently, especially with the rise of the internet and people posting things on social media that show people exhibiting various degrees of entitlement. People who display an attitude of entitlement usually behave in such a way as to show that they should get special treatment for no other reason than because they are. They feel that the rules should be applied strictly against everyone else while they themselves do not have to follow them. Another form of entitlement is where someone feels as if they are owed something from society; that they should be given something not because they earned it but because they perceived that they were discriminated against. Entitlement can also arise from the feeling that one's ancestors did something special or had something horrible done to them.

The opposite of entitlement would be humility. Real humility is the sense of one's place in creation, not puffing oneself up nor belittling oneself. It is recognizing the role that one has to play in the community, while recognizing that their role is no more or less important than anyone else's role. In Biblical terms, those who are humble take the words from Micah 6:8 to heart: the Lord "**has told**

you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" A humble attitude is one that sets aside their own personal goals and desires and follows the desire of God. A humble person understands their role in life and gladly pursues it.

The danger here is that we develop a list of humble acts and not-so-humble acts. As long as we do what is on the acceptable humble acts list, then we would be okay, we get to check off the humble attitude check box. But approaching it this way turns these things into a legalism which takes our eyes off of others and onto ourselves and what we do. Instead of life being what God has done for us, we turn it around into something about us, something that we need to do in order to be 'noticed,' in order to earn enough points to get us into heaven. But that is not what the Biblical message is. The Biblical message is that by doing God's will, by doing those things for which we were created, then God will bless us. The hard work of overcoming those forces which we could never defeat has already been accomplished by Jesus Christ. There is no need for us to grasp any higher and try to play god. That is where true humility lies - that we accept our role in creation and do it to the best of our ability. An ability which is enabled by God who gives us the gifts we need to succeed in that role. When we recognize that all that we have comes from God and it is God alone who grant us these gifts, then we will be blessed with even greater gifts, gifts that can transcend even our wildest imaginations.

In today's Gospel reading, it may seem like Jesus is just talking about banquets and luncheons and guest lists and working to be humble, but when we dig a little deeper into the text, we can see that Jesus is using the specific events that He was attending to teach us something about God and our place in relation to God. So, instead of trying to act so that others may think of us as humble, may we be

willing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' using the gifts which God has given us.

YouTube links

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/nAKCQKjXWfI>

Service: <https://youtu.be/DXu3-0ktetY>