

“A Place of Honor”

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” (Luke 14:10).

Have you ever gone to a concert or sporting event only to find that when you arrive at the arena your seats are in the last row? After experiencing a few frustrating events where I’ve had to squint to see the performers, I’m always tempted to move into the unoccupied seats near the stage, and a few times I’ve even done it, but there is no more humiliating feeling than having a stern-faced usher remove you from your borrowed seat while the entire section eyes you with disdain.

As today’s Gospel lesson opens, we find Jesus dining at the house of a prominent Pharisee. With the grief Jesus endured from the Pharisees this setting seems strange, and yet as Luke fills in the details of this dinner he makes sure to tell us that they were, “watching him carefully.” This phrase is used four times in the Gospels and each time this statement about the surveillance conveys a spirit of suspicion. With this in mind, it’s clear that this ruler of the Pharisees had invited Jesus into his home – not because he was being hospitable or because he wanted to hear Jesus teach – Jesus was sitting among the Pharisees because were they looking to trap him, and this helps to explain the presence of the man with “dropsy.”

The meaning of “dropsy” is uncertain. It’s the only time this word is used in the Bible and it’s a term that seems to be related with swelling or retention of water in the body. Regardless of this man’s ailment, it’s his presence at the party that should get our attention. In the home of a notable Pharisee, this man should not be present. A man with a disorder like this would have been considered sinful and unclean and there is no way, especially on the Sabbath, that a group of Pharisees would have tolerated his presence in the home of one their rulers – unless they had brought him there for a reason.

There are seven times in Scripture when Jesus heals on the Sabbath, and on each occasion these miracles drew harsh and heated criticism from the Pharisees. You see, keeping of the Sabbath was so highly regarded by the religious establishment that some Pharisees believed that if Israel could truly keep two Sabbaths in a row, this ultimate act of obedience would initiate the coming of the Messiah. Think about this. They actually had tied their salvation to their ability to keep this law.

It’s not that the Sabbath wasn’t important. God had commanded His people to keep the Sabbath, but the Pharisees had taken this day of rest – this gift of grace that God had given His people to remind them of the eternal rest He had promised – and they had transformed it into a legalistic act they felt duty bound to police. And did they ever! The Pharisees were so intent on making sure that everyone kept the Sabbath that they made up all kinds of additional rules and customs; laws that they had added to God’s command; laws that often stood in stark contrast to what God had said through Moses in the Torah. And in their attempt to catch Jesus in violation of their manmade ordinance against healing on the Sabbath, there in the home of a prominent Pharisee mysteriously appeared in front of Jesus, a man suffering from dropsy.

Jesus understood exactly what was going on. He saw through their feeble attempt to frame Him and He took the fight straight to them. Jesus asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” The room was filled with Pharisees and experts in the law. These were the men charged with enforcing the written code of Moses, if anyone would have been able to clarify the application of Sabbath rules it was this group of people, and yet when Jesus asked them a simple question about healing on the Sabbath they sat in absolute silence. And even after Jesus healed the man and sent him away, they had no response. They were convicted by this divine act of mercy, and they knew that they had no Biblical foundation for their legalistic embellishments to God’s Sabbath Law. Their trap had backfired and there was nothing they could say. And it is here that Jesus begins to teach.

Luke tells us that, as the meal approached, Jesus, “noticed how they chose the places of honor,” each one pining for a seat that would get them noticed by the host. And as this political power play unfolded, Jesus told them this parable: “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” (Luke 14:8-10).

On the surface, this seems to be a simple and rather practical story about humility, but there is an important shift that takes place in this parable. You see, Jesus moves the setting from an ordinary Sabbath luncheon to a wedding feast. You see, Jesus isn’t just teaching table etiquette here. Jesus is talking about a wedding feast – and *this* is salvation language! The stakes have suddenly been raised. Instead of criticizing the way the Pharisees jockeyed for positions of prestige at the table, Jesus is now talking about heaven and His message is clear: Pride has no place in the Kingdom of God.

As Jesus sat at a table full of hypocritical and self-righteous Pharisees, He was calling them out! He was showing them for who they truly were. He was exposing their pride. And His message to these Pharisees is most certainly a message that applies to us as well. Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” The words that Jesus speaks are words that we all need to hear. Think about it. How often do we bargain with God? How often do we find comfort in the fact that at least we went to church? How often do we think, “At least I am not like *that* person at work” or “*that* family member?” How often do we secretly, or not so secretly, compare our sins to others, thinking that somehow this will result in some kind of priority seating in next life? The truth is that heaven is not earned. Salvation is not a result of our good decisions or hard work. And the fact that we go to church or give of our time or treasure has nothing at all to do with our place at the table.

So, what does this all mean for us? What does it mean when Jesus tells us to humble ourselves? For starters, it means that we need to be honest. We need to be honest about our need. We need to be honest about our problems. We need to come clean about our failures and confess that we have tried to do it on our own. We need to admit that we are sinners who deserve nothing from the host...because it is here – and only here – in the surrender of our pride and in emptying ourselves of the need to control that Christ takes over.

You see Christ didn’t come for the proud. Christ didn’t come for the prestigious. He didn’t come for those who keep a record of all the “good” things they’ve done. Christ came for sinners. Christ died for sinners. And when we acknowledge that we are sinners; when we are honest about who we are, when we stop jockeying for position, and instead, fall on our faces before God, His grace takes over and we are lifted up.

You see, the truth is that we are the poor...we are the crippled...we are the lame...we are the blind...and yet the Host has welcomed us to the feast. He has made us worthy by His blood. He has taken away our shame, and He has called us into His kingdom with not conditions and no demands. Today, the Master has said to you, “Friend, move up higher.” And in Christ Jesus, you have been called to a place of honor – and it is a seat no one can ever take away. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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