

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 4, 2015

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 2:1-5, 366:5, 34, 434, 411:4-5.

Lessons: Psalm 113, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 23:1-13.

Sermon Text: Luke 14:7-14.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

At the ordinary feasts of the Jews there was a good deal of informality, but at the wedding-suppers the question of rank was very important. Jesus had noticed at this ordinary dinner at a Pharisee's house that the guests all made an attempt to take the places of honor at the table. Remember that the Jews did not sit at tables as we do. They had couches or sofas so that they could lie down at the table for eating and drinking.

Today Jesus presents

A PARABLE TEACHING HUMILITY

- 1. Jesus admonishes men for seeking to be praised and honored.**
- 2. He then gives us a lesson in true humility, and**
- 3. Encourages us to serve others in genuine humility.**

As the background for this parable, Jesus notices how one person after another forces himself to the front, and tries to center attention upon himself in seeking to gain a position at the head of the table. Each desires to be the most important.

He speaks to them about a wedding feast and says *“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.”* Jesus speaks about the practice of invited guests to pick the places of honor at the table. He tells about a person invited to a wedding banquet who chooses a place of honor. The host is forced to ask this person to move to a place away from the head table to make room for a more distinguished guest.

Here humiliation comes to a proud person who is demoted. Jesus suggests the proper course of action: start out sitting in the lowest 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.”* All the guests will notice when the host asks such a person to take a better place. The general rule is then stated by Jesus: *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* This idea is repeated several times in the Gospels. Although Jesus would like to teach the Pharisees, he can hope that at least his disciples will learn to live and practice humility.

At a wedding-feast the guests should not strive for the most honored seats, for it might easily happen that one to whom greater respect is due is among those invited. And what a humiliation it would be then if the host would openly request the bold, arrogant guest to give up his place to another guest and have to move to the last place! The Lord advises the opposite method, to choose the lowest place, for then it might well happen that the humble guest would be invited to move farther to the head of the table, in this way receiving greater honor.

He was not simply giving them a lesson in good manners. It was a rebuke of the presumption and pride of the guests. His words are an admonition to humility in the most important sense of the word.

Let's make a spiritual application. Jesus' parable illustrates a rule which finds its application in the kingdom of God, as you heard in our Gospel lesson: ***"For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."*** (Matthew 23:12 NIV) Whoever exalts himself, and places himself above his neighbor; whoever boasts of his own merit and worthiness before God will be humbled, and will even be excluded from the kingdom of God. But whoever humbles himself before God, and consequently places himself also below his neighbor as a willing servant to serve his needs as opportunities arise will be exalted and will receive honor in the kingdom of God. For such humility shows the true attitude and mind of a disciple. It is one evidence of a repentance which is conscious of its own unworthiness. It is one evidence of faith, which glories only in the cross of Jesus and finds comfort only in his mercy.

In the previous chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus had given an illustration about those who would be excluded from the kingdom of heaven. On Judgment Day God will say to those who rejected God's way of salvation: ***"But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."*** (Luke 13:27-30 NIV)

True humility begins as an attitude of the heart and mind. A person should ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves"*** (Philippians 2:3 NIV) as you heard in our Epistle lesson.

Where does such humility come from? It comes from God with Jesus Christ as our example. We quote again from our Epistle lesson: ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"*** (Philippians 2:3-8 NIV)

Jesus Christ is the ultimate example and pattern for true humility. He did this, humbling himself from his heavenly throne and even dying for us because he loved us.

Love is a fundamental prerequisite to humility. When Jesus speaks of the greatest commandments of the Law of God, he says ***"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these."*** (Mark 12:28-31 NIV)

Put others first. We read in Proverbs: ***"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud."*** (Proverbs 16:18-19 NIV)

We must always, especially before God, choose the lowliest position. But we must be careful that we do not approach God – and our fellow men – with a false humility and merely select a place at the foot of the table, for such a choice may give evidence of the very arrogance which Jesus is condemning. It is the state of the mind and heart which is all important, not the outward act. The external action is significant only as the expression of the heart. This exhortation to humility is an idea which the Lord has used elsewhere, as, for example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector There Jesus tells us about ***"Two men [who] went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"*** (Luke 18:10-13 NIV) Then, to conclude the parable Jesus says ***"I tell you that this man, [-- that is, the tax collector --] rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** (Luke 18:14 NIV)

Jesus extends this teaching about humility to his host. *"Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 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.'"* (Luke 14:12-14 NIV)

In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, on a special day when people were to celebrate hearing the Word of the Lord again in Jerusalem, *"Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'"* (Nehemiah 8:10 NIV) The book of James is filled with encouragement to do good and to help others. We read, for example, *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* (James 2:14-17 NIV)

Jesus encourages helping those who cannot pay you back for your hospitality and charity. Of course, we could still invite friends, brothers or relatives, or rich neighbors. But more importantly, invite those who cannot pay you back. Give to those who cannot pay you back.

Jesus teaches us here that using what we have for works of charity is better than using it to make ourselves appear good and generous. If we try to make ourselves appear good and generous, that is not the humility Jesus is seeking.

The goal should not be that we may be paid again. Jesus said *"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed."*

Let your giving be real charity to those who lack necessities. Do not expect to be repaid, for *"you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* On judgment day God will recognize the good works of the believers, their fruits of faith, as we read in Matthew 25 when all people stand before Christ on Judgment Day. When he welcomes the believers to eternal life, he will say *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."* (Matthew 25:35-36 NIV)

The book of Proverbs emphasizes our sermon in these words: *"Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, 'Come up here,' than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman."* (Proverbs 25:6-7 NIV)

So how about us? Is true humility one of the virtues with which we clothe ourselves? And we must beware of false humility. What is in the heart is what matters.

May the true humility of the heart which Jesus taught become part of our hearts and our lives and our deeds. Amen.