

Humility and Exaltation

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Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — XIII after Pentecost, August 29, 2004

Luke 14:1-14 NIV

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away.

Then he asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" And they had nothing to say.

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "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. 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. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

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."

Let me begin by relating an experience I had many years ago. My wife was a new teacher in a high school, and being at the bottom of the faculty totem pole she was tapped to be a chaperone for one of the school dances. Naturally, I went along as her "date." We arrived as things were still being set up, and we noticed that at one end of the gym there were several sofas and stuffed armchairs in a little circle. How kind of the school, we thought, to provide a special place for the chaperones. So we went over and sat down to observe the rest of the preparations.

Just as the dance was about to start, I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned to face several students, all nicely dressed in tuxedos and gowns and such. "Excuse me," said the first young man, "these seats are reserved."

"But we're the chaperones," I explained.

"I'm sorry," replied the young man. "These are for the *patrons*."

I looked behind the students, and found they were leading a procession of a dozen or so adults, elegantly attired and looking like the "cream of the crop" of that community. It became quickly obvious that we peon faculty chaperones had trespassed into territory reserved only for the really important people — the local *muckety-mucks* who were the class's honored guests or who, perhaps, had shelled out cash to sponsor the dance.

The incident made me pretty angry. It was humiliating to be told we had to step down from that exalted spot where we had placed ourselves. If I had been a Christian then, I might have had a better perspective. I might have taken the whole matter less seriously. I might even have remembered that Jesus warned us about exactly this sort of thing, in our Gospel reading for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost. For, here in Luke 14, he tells us, "when you are invited, take the lowest place. . . .For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled."

Now, of course, my wife and I had no intention of *exalting ourselves* by sitting in seats reserved for others. It was an honest mistake; nobody had clued us in that only the *patrons* were supposed to sit there. It was only my resentment at being displaced that makes Jesus' words really applicable to the situation. The real problem was in *me*, not the circumstances, and I'm afraid my exit from the scene was not as gracious as it could have been.

That was “a long time ago, in a galaxy far away,” but my defensive attitude of resentment at slights, real or imagined, continued to plague me till after I became a Christian and the Lord gave me the resources to begin dealing with it. And I still deal with it to some extent. I guess we all do.

This is really a question of our self-image, or how we look at ourselves. Paul, in Romans 12:3, wrote, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” He was talking about how we each understand our spiritual gifts in the life of the body of Christ, but I think we can take his words in a more general sense. As Christians we learn to look at ourselves realistically, “with sober judgment,” as Paul says, and this might keep us from having those feelings I had at that high school dance.

It’s not that we demean ourselves, or put ourselves down. Instead, we simply understand that we’re not the big deal we thought we were. The world doesn’t revolve around us, after all. As Christians we’re called to a high purpose in life: to glorify God and enjoy his presence and serve him. And when God’s glory is our central concern, the little slights that come our way don’t have the same power to humiliate. Our high purpose doesn’t make *us* any higher than anyone else, for it’s only Jesus that we are to lift up, that others might be drawn to him.

But let me back up now and take another look at our reading from the Gospel of Luke: “When [Jesus] noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ‘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.’”

There’s really a lot here, and we’ll get to it, but first let’s ask: Why would anyone thrust himself into a “place of honor” that might not rightfully be his? What’s going on in this grab for attention, or power, or exaltation over other people? We see it all around us, in politics, in sports and entertainment, in our workplace, in the home, and even — Lord help us — in the church. There are always those who seem to covet the highest place, in order to enjoy the recognition and esteem of other people. If we’re honest we’ll have to admit that it’s not always somebody else who does this. It might be you or I. Well, I don’t know about “you,” but I sure know about “I.”

What’s going on here? As I said before, it’s a question of what we really think of ourselves. But it works in a perverse sort of way. If we are really *happy* with ourselves, I doubt that we’re going to make a mad dash for the place of honor. We don’t need that external stamp of approval we think will be conferred by being seated in the patron’s corner. We’ll be content to take a lower place, even the lowest, knowing that our place in Jesus Christ is the only place that matters. We don’t have to promote ourselves, because real promotion comes only from the Lord. Self-promotion always backfires.

So when we see another person climbing over us to “get to the top,” or making themselves into a “big shot,” or scrambling for the place of honor and attention in our group, our family, our office or some other environment, then we need to take a look at ourselves and we’ll understand what’s happening. That person we think has such a high opinion of himself is really filled with self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness. Those motives may be well covered up, and hidden even from that person; few people do have a really good understanding of themselves, after all. But the underlying cause of their behavior, reaching for the top of the heap, is that they’re unsure of their own worth and are looking for something that will reinforce that good feeling they would *like to have* about themselves. When you see someone acting like a real jerk, it’s not because he thinks he’s better than you. It’s because he really *doesn’t like himself*.

Understanding this could make us a lot more tolerant of people, even people who try to walk all over us. When you’re tempted to “cut them down to size,” remember that they’re *hurting*. The hurt that causes their behavior may be greater than your hurt as a result of their behavior.

That’s true in many situations of life. I once conducted a funeral for the wife of the man who owned the town’s local hardware store. A few days later I walked into the store and the owner launched into a tirade against me for something I had said about his wife during the service — actually, it was because I had mentioned that she had prayed before her death to commit her life to Christ. Her husband took this

as a reflection on her character, that she had not been “a good woman” till that time. I didn’t know what to make of this, but then it came to me how much this man was hurting. He had seen his wife through a long, wasting illness, and he was tired and depleted and lonely. I know he was lonely, because a few months later he married a widow in the community, the mother of another of my church members. I wish I had summoned the courage to go back to him and try to help him find the peace of Christ. But maybe I would have been the wrong person to try that. And anyway, I didn’t want to risk another attack. I was hurting, too.

Letting our hurts control us is a formula for failure. If we look for the “place of honor,” for recognition and approval from other people, to bolster our self-doubt and lack of worth and cover our hurts, we’re riding for a fall. Jesus warned us not to try it, but instead to “take the lowest place” at the banquet. Then, he said, “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. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

I said there was a lot here, and we would get to it, and this is as good a place as any to get to it. You see, this principle of humbling ourselves, that God might exalt us, isn’t just a general principle of life. No, it’s a principle of life in the *kingdom of God* — that “heavenly city” we were thinking of last week. Jesus’ teaching is always about the kingdom of God, the inbreaking of God’s sovereignty over the affairs of men.

Have you noticed how often in the Gospels Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a meal, in fact, a *banquet*? Think of Luke 13:29-30, for example: “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.” It’s no accident that Jesus used a meal, the last supper with his disciples, to symbolize the renewing of God’s covenant with his people. Giving the cup, he said, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Next Sunday we will sit again at the Lord’s table, and eat and drink with him in the feast of the kingdom of God. Our life in Christ is a banquet, and our host is the Lord of hosts, and if we come in humility to take the lowest place, the place of service, he will come and say to us, “Friend, come up higher.”

We take the “lowest place” at the banquet, the place of service and not the place of honor, because we already know our place. Our place is secure in Jesus, “our only Mediator and Advocate.” We don’t have anything to prove about ourselves, because he pleads for us. We are to have the mind of Christ, says Paul:

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!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).*

Indeed, when we “take the lowest place” we’re only doing what Jesus did: not claiming to be equal to God and striving for glory and honor, but depending on God to bring us to that place of esteem where we

understand who we are in Christ — people made in God’s own image as responsible, capable and *beloved* creatures who don’t need to prove who they are to themselves or anyone else.

But before we end I want to add a word of caution. I suggested earlier that we don’t always have a good understanding of ourselves or our motives. We don’t always think of ourselves “with sober judgment,” as Paul says. And if we aren’t careful we can *appear* to take to lowest place but really be doing so with an ulterior motive.

We might be trying to *manipulate* God into exalting us. You know that the person who says, “Well, after all I’m really a nobody around here,” is often looking for you to tell them otherwise, to tell them they’re really important. We may be tempted to try that with the Lord and it won’t work. He doesn’t respond well to manipulation. God wants to exalt us not in ourselves but in Jesus, with whom we are already “raised us up with Christ and seated . . . with him in the heavenly realms,” (Ephesians 2:6) as Paul says. That’s really about all the exaltation anyone could stand! Let’s not try to force God’s hand to make us look important, by *pretending* to be unimportant. We’re not unimportant; by his blood Jesus has already made us “kings and priests” to God his Father (Revelation 1:5-6). There is no higher honor than being able to minister worship and service to God.

Then, we might “take the lowest place” with another ulterior motive , to avoid responsibility. Nobody asks much of someone who looks like he’s at the bottom of the heap. We may be tempted to hide behind the pretense of lowliness and humility in order not to be bothered by demands from our family, our employer, our teacher, our church or some other person or group that might ask us to do something. That false humility will never lead to exaltation in Christ, for the committed Christian is always willing to say, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13).

It’s never simple, is it, this Christian life of humility and exaltation? So much to think about, so much to be on guard for, lest we go astray at some critical point. “Let a man examine himself,” Paul said; our motives are always suspect. No, it’s never simple. But neither is it hard, for one reason: The Christian life isn’t about us, it’s about Christ. Staying close to Jesus is what makes this new life possible, because we live it with him. “Take my yoke upon you,” he says, “and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).

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