

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 28, 2022 (Proper 17, Year C)  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

We love to hear stories about high and mighty people getting brought back down to earth, getting humbled.

I like the story historians tell about the funeral of Charlemagne. Charlemagne was the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages – Constantine. After his death, a grand funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral at Aix, France. When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who blocked the cathedral door.

As was the custom, the Bishop asked, "Who comes?"

The Emperor's proud herald proclaimed "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire."

The Bishop replied, "Him I know not. Who comes?"

The herald, a bit shaken, replied, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth."

"Him I know not," the Bishop said again. "Who comes?"

The herald, now completely crushed, responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ."

To which the Bishop responded, "Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

The Bishop's point, of course, was that, in God's eyes, we are all equal — Charlemagne, the Pope, Mother Teresa, you and me. No one of us will ever be "great" enough to force their way into the presence of God.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus sees people stumbling over each other trying to get the best seats at the table, and he won't stand for it. He stops them and gives them some advice. He reminds them of something of everybody already knew. They'd heard it a hundred times before. It was common wisdom. It was even recorded in the 2 verses from Proverbs we heard this morning: "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" (25:6-7).

It was nothing new, but it's just table manners. Why does Jesus bother with it? Well, Jesus pointed it out, because even simple MANNERS can demonstrate a truth of God's Kingdom: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now, I want to stop right there, because every sermon I've ever heard on this saying by Jesus has focused on the first part – our need for humility. But personally, I've always had a hard time HEARING that. I'm no King Charlemagne. I've always been EXTREMELY HARD on myself. I'm my OWN WORST CRITIC. I've struggled for YEARS with low self-esteem and depression, so I've thought, "How could Jesus ask me to think LESS of myself?"

Now I've come to realize that it's not just me; many, even most of us, feel that way. Growing up, we're taught so firmly not to think too highly of ourselves, that we end up thinking too LITTLE of ourselves. We honestly DON'T think that we're worthy to sit in that seat of honor. We don't deserve it. We don't want to call attention to ourselves. We don't want to be the first in line. We don't want to be the first served. We don't want to sit in the front pews; we want to sit further back, so we can be anonymous. We HAVE BEEN humbled ALREADY; LIFE humbled us.

I've become very fond of a quote I read. C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying, "Humility is NOT thinking LESS of yourself, but thinking of YOURSELF LESS." THAT makes more sense to me.

So, for those of us who AREN'T scrambling for that seat of honor, hear the SECOND part of Jesus' saying: Jesus says that NOT ONLY are the MIGHTY humbled; the HUMBLED, the ones who HAVE BEEN humbled, are EXALTED!

At the banquet, and in LIFE, we try to slip in INCONSPICUOUSLY and find a seat where no one will NOTICE us, but the HOST at the banquet SEES us, and he comes down to greet us. He welcomes us to the meal. And then he says, "Friend, what are you doing sitting WAY back HERE? I've got a seat SAVED for you, RIGHT up front, at MY table. Come up HERE and eat with ME."

We say, "No, no, I couldn't. I can't go up there with YOU. I'm not DRESSED NICE enough. I'm not ... GOOD enough."

But then Jesus puts his hand on our shoulder and smiles, and looks us right in the eye and says, "YES, YOU ARE."

Show picture "The Invitation"

This painting is called "The Invitation" by Morgan Weistling. I think it illustrates God's WELCOME very well. In the background there's a set of double doors that are opened to a beautiful, warm, golden banquet hall filled with people and delicacies. But outside there's SNOW on the ground. Notice that Jesus is standing OUTSIDE those doors, out in the COLD, with US. He's reaching DOWN for a man KNEELING in the snow. And with his other hand, he's gesturing inside, with a warm, loving, compassionate smile – an INVITATION. But the man seems to be saying, "Me? You're inviting me?"

That's HOW so many of us FEEL – like we're not WORTHY of God's love. But Jesus says, "YES, YOU ARE. You are ALWAYS WELCOME here, with ME. You always HAVE been."

That kind of love changes your life. I remember when my son Samuel was born, and again when my daughter Annabelle was born, I said, "God, I can't do this. I don't have the STRENGTH to be the man I NEED to be." But then I looked at my baby, looked into their eyes, and God said, "YES, YOU DO." And then God GAVE me the strength. This kind of love changes your life.

That's why we come to worship – because it CHANGES us, because it MAKES us WHO HE SAYS we are. A pastor of a church in Chicago was once asked why African American worship services often last much longer than one hour. He said, "They last that long because we NEED them to last that long. The world BEATS us down, day after day, GRINDING God's image out of us, making us feel LOWER than low. We worship for as LONG as it TAKES to build ourselves back UP, to remember AGAIN that God LOVES us. No matter our color or the amount of dollars in our pocket, WE TOO are created in God's image. We worship until we have SUNG enough, and PRAYED enough, and are REVIVED enough, to go BACK into the world and stand AGAINST ALL that oppresses our people."

For us Lutherans, it's not the length of worship; it's what we DO here. We have communion. We believe that in this meal, Christ gives us himself. He feeds us with his body and blood. He forgives us, restores us, and enlivens our faith. That's why we share it every chance we get, because we NEED it, because we're STARVING for it. Everyone is.

And everyone is welcome. Jesus says "Invite the poor, invite the crippled, the lame and the blind." Jesus isn't just giving us a pep talk here; he's giving us a MISSION, a PURPOSE. He says, "Now that I've lifted YOU up, lift OTHER people up. Tell people that you care about them. Tell them that you LOVE them. Tell them that GOD loves them. Lift up OTHER people who have been humbled like YOU were."

I can't tell you how IMPORTANT this is. EVERYONE needs to HEAR this – that God LOVES them and God WANTS them.

There's something I've done with youth in the church for years. Confirmation kids are at a stage where they are trying their HARDEST to be cool and tough and nothing can touch them. They say, "Whatever pastor." But I FIND a time to come closer to them, and put my hand on their shoulder, and look them in the eye, and say, "You are a child of God, and God loves you, and you are ALWAYS WELCOME here." And I tell you, as cool and tough as they're TRYING to be, EVERY LAST ONE of them gets a tear in their eye.

It's because they NEED to HEAR that. Everyone does. EVERYONE needs to know that they are loved, and that there's a PLACE where they are WANTED and NEEDED and WELCOME. That place is HERE, in *the* CHURCH/WORSHIP.

The banquet is the Kingdom of God, and EVERYONE is WELCOME. But, according to Jesus, the Kingdom is NOW, and it's right HERE in THIS place. God loves you. And you are ALWAYS WELCOME. Amen.