

Twelve Sunday in Pentecost, August 31, 2025.

St. Michael's Church

The Rev. Joshua Wong

Gospel reading: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Today's Gospel story puts Jesus in an unusual setting. Jesus was invited by an elite leader of the Pharisees to his dinner party. The circumstances of this invitation were already suspicious to begin with. Being invited was merely an opportunity for the Pharisees to find more fault with Jesus. As you may know, the Pharisees were a prominent Jewish political and religious party known for their strict adherence to Jewish law. They despised Jesus because he taught contrary to their teachings. Jesus taught about God's grace rather than the adherence to ancient laws and traditions. They also despised him because he was attracting more and more followers, and they were afraid of losing power.

At the dinner party, Jesus makes an observation. Being the agitator that he was, he gives the host his observations and a parable without being asked. In all of his messages, Jesus preaches that no commandment is greater than loving God first and foremost and second, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus' message is that these commandments don't replace existing laws; they envelop them. Love is the center of all we do. When we truly love God with our heart, soul, and mind and

love our neighbors as ourselves, love directs how we act. Jesus' parable to the Pharisees is all about them having humility instead of arrogance. As expected, this message didn't go well with this crowd.

Jesus first speaks about not taking the most honorable seat in a party. Our scriptural passage takes place in an ancient Mediterranean culture in which honor and shame were extremely important. In Palestinian feasts of the time, reclining couches were arranged in groups of three, with the center grouping reserved for persons of wealth and prestige. If persons came early, as some did on this occasion, they were best advised not to take these seats, as they could later be displaced by late arrivals who outranked them. This would be embarrassing for all concerned. Instead, one should take a lower place and then possibly be honored by being invited to move higher.

It was conventional wisdom that it was better to take a lower seat at a social occasion and be invited to come up higher. But for this crowd, honor and prestige were their main concern. Jesus knew that this crowd placed great value in being recognized by their peers as "important, wealthy and prestigious." For Jesus and Luke, however, this parable is not merely about table manners, rather, Luke's

message to them is that God is the one who exalts the lowly and brings down those who exalt themselves. In another word, humility is more important to God than self-recognition.

To drive the topic of humility even further, Jesus then turns to his host and continuing in the same vein, Jesus advises him that for future parties he should not just invite friends and acquaintances who could reciprocate at the same level, but rather include the poor, sick, and outcast, who were needy but should not and could not repay in kind.

Our reading this week doesn't tell us how Jesus's listeners reacted. But it did hit a nerve for me. It made me think about my own intentions about hospitality, and how I judge the worth of others based on physical appearance, where they live, academic accomplishments, or professional titles. Do I only want to “hang out” with those who will reciprocate, and make me look worthy, or do I love people for who they are, not what they have?

In our modern social life, is Jesus asking us to not maximize our social capital at every opportunity? And to ignore society's pecking orders? Or, is Jesus teaching us here to open our hearts and home to people who can do nothing for us? People we can't impress or earn favors from?

Why on earth should we do that?

Because this is what God wants from us. God is the great reverser of our priorities, and our hierarchies. Jesus came to earth to turn our values inside out and upside down. He asks us to love and recognize our human kind, because God knows our human tendency to judge who is "in" and who is "out," and He knows that we value prestige, self-worth over love for all people.

I recently watched a YouTube channel by an Orange County realtor. He shared about a new prestigious community where each home was designed for ultimate prestige, and privacy. Including the home's own gate, the community had two other gates one had to pass through in order to arrive at the house. Each home outshined the next in regard to opulence and a display of wealth. I think Jesus may be

speaking about this. We humans can easily be self-centered and should be reminded about the importance of humility and caring for those who have less.

The topic of humility is rare in our modern vocabulary, and yet, God knows that it is foundational to living a holy life of honor and respect to God and to one another.

The lesson of humility does not only speak about how we treat one another, but humility also teaches us that God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity, instead, God's kingdom is about abundance, where everyone is invited in and welcomed, because we are all God's dearly beloved. Everyone is cherished by God, not just the socially successful or the beautiful or the powerful. Humility is not found in the perfect Instagram picture, but Jesus says, beauty is found also with the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Humility in God's kingdom is the table where there are many seats, and all of them are honorable seats, enough seats for everyone, including you and me.

This week, I was driving home on the freeway, going through downtown and there was a LED traffic sign that read, “Incident at Ave. 52, right two lanes are closed. As stated, when I arrived in the area, there was a long back up. When I slowly made my way to the scene of the delay, I noticed a tent set up and a backpack on the ground under a freeway bridge. I suspected that someone jumped to their death. Then the following day, on the 105 freeway during rush hour traffic I was in the fast lane when I saw a woman standing by herself next to the freeway looking like she was going to cross. Both of these incidents made me think of the tragic lives of so many people that surround us in our daily life. Lives of the poor, the sick and the outcast. God calls us to remember them. It made me think of today’s Gospel passage. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Humility reminds us of our own vulnerabilities, how fragile our own lives are. By the grace of God, we are where we are. Jesus reminds us to be humble, because there are no “us” and “them.” We care for everyone, because Christ cares about everyone. We at St. Michael’s practice caring in practical ways through our generous giving to our charities— CASE, donations to PV Thrift shop that raise money for Family Promise, Veterans, Student ministry and to PRISM. Humility is

remembering the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. That is why we are generous.

Each week, when we gather here at Jesus' table, we are actively protesting the culture of upward mobility and competitiveness that surrounds us. To eat and drink with God is to live in tension with the pecking orders that define our society — including our boardrooms, our college admissions committees, our church politics, and our government policies that exclude the care of the poor and needy. Instead, Jesus is calling us to humble ourselves and place our hope in a radically different kingdom, Christ's kingdom, where we consider people from every race, and sociological status as beloved.

Today's Epistle reading echos this thought. "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Jesus asks us to consider our table manners. Where we sit speaks volumes, and the people whom we choose to welcome reveal what is in our own souls. Jesus says, favor the ones who cannot repay you. Prefer the poor. Choose obscurity. In the realm of God, the ragged strangers at our doorstep are the angels that will reveal God to us. Seeking out the “places of honor” in order to be exalted is never the goal, The goal, in a word, is love. But not just any love. A love without ulterior motive, without scheme or advantage, without quid quo pro. A truly generous love, a love that does not seek to be “repaid.” A kind of love, free from all need for compensation, never mind exaltation, is the love God exalts!

We will conclude with a prayer from Teresa of Avila who was born in 1515. She was a Carmelite nun who later earned a reputation as a mystic, reformer, and writer who experienced divine visions.

*Let us pray:*

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.  
Amen.