

**Invited To Come Up Higher
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 27 and 28, 2022**

Proverbs 25:2:6-7 - 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."

Luke 14: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.....For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are wedding receptions that go smoothly, and then there are those which give the Type A personalities all kinds of heartburn.

Our daughter Michelle and Brandon's reception in our Lutheran School gymnasium was wonderful in so many ways, but there were a couple of hiccups along the way.

- Like forgetting to line up 8-10 servers to help our 80 year old caterer Margaret serve the meal. And so as Debi and I entered the reception, we noticed that 10 of our best friends had given up their status of honored guests to work in the kitchen and serve as waiters and waitresses.
- And then there was the matter of the lineup for the root beer crossing over the lineup for the fruit punch. And then as I tried to usher my dear parents towards the food line, I kept talking to people, leaving my parents to fend for themselves.
- And then the root beer keg went empty.
- And then the father of the groom whispered to us that we had forgotten to get ketchup or mustard for the bratwurst.

Other than that all was well. The guests were all behaved, and as far as I know, there was no pushing and shoving for positions of honor. That was the case in our Gospel lesson for the day, where Jesus noticed a scramble for places of honor and took the occasion to point out the ugliness of pride and the virtues of humility.

Today's sermon is the fifth in a series of five sermons focused on our "Life Together in Christ." Our sermons have explored the dangers of following Christ at a distance and the beauty of doing so closely. In the previous four weeks:

- *Struggling to Enter Through the Narrow Door / Striving vs Coasting*
- *Divided at the Cross / Speaking truth in love vs. being satisfied with a false peace*
- *Valued by God / Resting in God's promises vs. worrying about that which is out of our control*
- *Rich Towards God / Gratefulness that spills over in generosity vs. storing up and trusting in our wealth for security*

Our sermon theme today comes from both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons, where Solomon and then Jesus Himself urge the listeners to take the less honorable seats at wedding receptions, in hopes that the king or the host might invite you to come up higher. ***Two lessons we would learn today about choosing humility: 1) Taking the low road as invited guests, and 2) Taking the low road as the ones doing the inviting.***

Taking the low road as the invited guests

Normally, we think of taking the high road as the best thing to do. As in letting a friend's petty comment go and refusing to respond in kind. As in biting our tongues and overcoming bad behavior with kindness. As in turning the other cheek for the sake of the Gospel.

But in today's sermon, taking the low road refers to choosing humility instead of, as my dad used to say, "tooting our own horns." It means staying humble in conversations and social settings, as opposed to pushing and shoving our way to the top of the social ladders.

In Jesus' day, the Jews had adopted the Roman practice of reclining at the table instead of sitting in chairs. Guests would lounge on couches and prop up on their left elbows, with legs extended from the table. The person reclining on the left side would have the fullest view of the groom, and the guests reclining on the right would have to bend back in order to see what was going on. There was a definite pecking order apparent in the seating chart, and the Pharisees were famous for pushing and shoving their way to the more convenient places on the reclining couches. Two truths Jesus wanted to impress on those first century Pharisees and us.

Truth #1 is that Mirrors never (lie)

The Pharisees were looking at themselves in the mirror of the ceremonial law and seeing that, outwardly speaking, they were full of righteousness and good works worthy of praise. But Jesus kept on holding the mirror of God's moral law to their insides and inviting them to see that their hearts were far from God. Full of hypocrisy and sinful pride. The Pharisees saw their behavior at formal dinners as normal, but Jesus wanted them to see it as rude. Annoying. And even worse, their haughty spirits were keeping them out of the kingdom.

Jesus would hold the mirror of the Ten Commandments before us as invited guests at His table today. To see ourselves as we really are, by nature. We tend to see ourselves as sinners who have made plenty of mistakes in life, but the Spirit of God would remind us that it's worse than that. Our bad habits aren't just annoying to God, they grieve His Spirit. We don't just fall a little bit short of His glory, we fall way short. Our assignment each day isn't simply to pray to God to help us clean up our act, it's to drown the old and nasty adam inside of us through sincere repentance, that the new person named Jesus might rise up on the inside of us and rule the day.

Truth #2 is that Humility eventually (wins)

When Jesus told the Pharisees that if they really wanted to be honored in public, they should take the less prominent seats and wait to be invited by the host to come up higher - He was needling them with sarcasm. He was making fun of their pushy social behavior and warning them one more time that their self-centered attitudes and self-righteous behaviors were, in the long run, a losing strategy. Proverbs 16 declares, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

True humility is still the best way, even if it means being among the oppressed. Jesus knew that to be true, and He acted upon this principle in perfect fashion. It was for the joy that was set before him that motivated him to give up the riches of heaven, and to walk humbly all the way to a little hill outside of Jerusalem. It was for the victory of Easter Sunday that He endured the humiliation of Good Friday. In pure humility, He considered your salvation and mine more significant than Himself. Though He was and is and ever shall be true God, He did not consider equality with God something to be held onto and enjoyed. As you well know, He emptied Himself, He took on the form of a servant, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death, He was forsaken and beaten and spit at and slapped and rejected and scorned and tortured and crucified until dead and

buried. And when the time was just right, His Father in heaven invited Him to come on up to a higher place. Resurrected and ascended and to this very day and to the end of eternity, exalted, sitting in the place of highest honor, and ruling all of heaven and earth on behalf of His bride, the Church.

Humility eventually wins. Peter, who knew something about pride getting in the way of humbly and carefully following His Master, said it this way, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.” One more time, Jesus turns conventional wisdom upside down as He speaks the paradox of Christianity as precisely as it can be spoken, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers looking forward to that day when it’s their time to come on up higher and for their souls to be resting in the presence of Jesus Himself. And beyond to that day when the host of the heavenly banquet will invite, body and soul, to dine with Him at that banquet where the fine wine never runs out, the best of meats and potatoes and breads and desserts keep on coming!

Taking the low road as the ones doing the inviting

Now Jesus turns His attention to the hosts of that first century banquet and invite us to think of ourselves as part of a Committee or Task Force responsible for inviting others into the heavenly banquet. One more time, He challenges the way we church people normally think. We think the way my parents and aunts and uncles used to think. Aunt Linny would have us over for a Sunday chicken dinner followed by an afternoon of playing cards and games with cousins. And on the way out the door that evening, Mom would say - now it’s your turn to come to our place.

Jesus isn’t really forbidding us to invite friends or family over, but is encouraging us to go the second mile. To have an ongoing concern for society’s unfortunate and to take definite, decisive steps to be of help to them in Jesus’ Name. Two lessons we would learn today about inviting others into our social circle, and even more importantly, into our church family.

The first lesson is to remember that we are inviting folks to a table that is (round)

Our Lord's Table has neither a head, nor a foot. It's circular. In the Church, there are no places of honor, nor dishonor. There are no places closer to or farther away from the Groom. There is neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor, neither democrats nor republicans, neither lovers of Donald Trump nor haters. In this sanctuary, all are invited to come on up to a higher place. The homeless, the refugees, and the prisoners are welcome. The addicts, the lonely, and the elderly are welcome.

Dear friends in Christ, life doesn't get any better than at our Lord's round table. Here is Jesus Christ in all of his bloody glory. Jesus Himself forgiving our sorry souls. Reassuring our troubled consciences. Soothing our wounded spirits. And not only Jesus is present at our Lord's Table. If we listen closely, we will hear the angels and the archangels lauding and magnifying the Name of Jesus. If we see with the eyes of faith, we will see moms and dads and grandparents and sons and daughters and loved ones who have gone on before us robed in white and waving palm branches in victory. If we taste carefully, we will know what it is to be tasting paradise itself.

The second lesson is to be refusing to cross people off the (list)

- Story of crossing off cousins and friends for one of our daughter's wedding receptions
- Story of blocking or snoozing or unfriending friends on Facebook who disagreed with or annoyed me one too many times.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have their bad days, their good days, and their really good days.

On their bad days, they give up on people who have disappointed them one too many times. They say things like, "three strikes and you're out." Or "I hope you get what you have coming." Or "what goes around comes around." Or "I don't need this in my life."

On their good days, they confess their faults before God and one another. They cry out for the forgiveness of sins. They rest in the promises of God. They are slow to anger, slow to get even, slow to insist on their rights.

On their really good days, they go looking for the brokenhearted. They spend time with the down and the out. They walk humbly before God and they look forward to that day when Jesus will invite them to come up higher. Amen.