

Knowing Your Place

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St. Michael's

When at a wedding banquet Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

I remember eight summers ago when a young man drove up from Tampa, Florida requesting the blessing from the father to propose marriage to his daughter and a week later take my daughter to a nice dinner, and then at the Waterfront Park with a string trio hidden in the background playing their special song, he knelt down, offered up a ring, and popped the question. This, then, kicked into gear a very common issue: how to reconcile the banquet invitation list with the budget figure. With each person invited there is a cost associated.

To be invited to a wedding banquet sends a message that your relationship with the host is honored and valued. In Jesus' day those interested in climbing the social ladder saw the chairs at a banquet as the rungs of the ladder.

And I venture to say, when it comes to confronting human issues like human pride, social insecurity, and the addictive quest for broad public approval things haven't changed that much.

According to a comprehensive study released in 2006 by five psychologists, today's college students are more narcissistic and self-centered than their predecessors.

From 1982 to 2006, 16,475 college students completed an evaluation called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The study's leading author, Professor Jean Twenge of San Diego State University said the study asserts narcissists *"are more likely to have romantic relationships that are short-lived, at high risk for infidelity, emphasize personal convenience, and de-emphasize real emotional warmth. They are more likely to exhibit a high degree of game-playing, dishonesty, over-controlling behavior, and, if things don't go their way, even violent, reactive behaviors."*

Dr. Twenge adds. *"Current technology is fueling the increase in narcissism. The internet makes everyone feel at the center of their own universe and by their very names, Facebook and You Tube breed a constant preoccupation with attention-seeking."* And let me remind you this study is now ten years old.

We live in a world of hyper social evaluation where the question "who am I and what is my value?" rarely stands alone but is extended to include "who am I and what is my value... in comparison to you?" And we compete. We have Olympics that deal with physical evaluation where the question is not just am I fast and strong, but am I faster and stronger than you? In the classroom there is intellectual evaluation: "*I made a B on the test. What did you get?*"

But perhaps the most dangerous testing ground for this question is not in the classroom or sport venue or even in the land of office cubicles... but at the party. When it comes to the formation of my own inner sense of self-worth, how much is being formed and determined by my peers...determined by you?

As I said earlier, in the days of Jesus the formal occasion of a dinner party revealed the value of your relationship to the host in how close to the host you were seated. Is that how it works in the Kingdom? When I am evaluated in the midst of "all the company of heaven" by the Host of Heaven, where will I sit, I wonder? What is my place? Will one day God reveal my true value as a person by means of a seating chart? Where will you sit? Where will I sit? What will that mean about you? What will that mean about me?

Let me begin my response by simply asking you this morning (evening) to remember, Jesus begins his parable with these words, "When you have been *invited*...."

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, each of us has received a personal invitation from the Man whose resurrection rolled away the stone from the tomb not only of his own death but of ours as well. He's given us a way out...a way out and into the banquet of His own life. The door is open and has invited us to join Him. The banquet is totally paid for not by check or credit card, but by the blood of life sacrificed on a Cross.

Truth be told, we are the spiritually poor and the morally crippled. We are the lame disciples who constantly drag our feet and are blind to our own pride and hypocrisy. We do not deserve to be here at all. We are all equally undeserving... but here we are. We have been invited.

And given the nature of the invitation I think Jesus is trying to get it through our thick skulls how laughably silly it is to spend any energy wondering if a seating chart... anybody's seating chart ... is going to tell you anything real about your personal self-worth! The Gospel is shouting to us: "For heaven's sake! He died for you! Doesn't that knock the bottom right out of the importance of a seating chart?! Next to the sheer fact of the Gospel and the cost of the invitation we've each received, where we sit relative to one another in this world or the next is irrelevant. I believe our Lord is saying, *Look! I have given you an honored place in my life. Forget the seating chart! You are more than "at my table," you are in my Body!*

You have come here this morning (in part) to be reminded by the Gospel that God has invested heavily and personally in your life. This means that there can now be nothing simply ordinary about you or your life. When the Spirit of God is flowing in the bloodstream of our lives then even the common and menial things we are doing become transformed...when we do them faithfully...when we do them full...of faith. And they become transformed simply because the same God who spoke the universe into existence is choosing to invest himself in our commonplace activity. There is nothing simply ordinary about a Spirit-filled life.

Remember for most of his adult life Jesus learned and applied the skill of carpentry on a day by day basis by working side by side with his father Joseph. One of the common things a carpenter cranked out over and over in those days was a simple plow.

In the second century, the famous Christian teacher Justin Martyr grew up just over the hill from Galilee. He made a point of noting that the well-made plows made by Joseph and Jesus were still being used widely in his day. In all things Jesus was faithful. Jesus honored His father in heaven not just in all things spectacular and obvious. But he honored the Father as well in the simply usual, the typically unnoticed, and generally things as constantly mundane as making yet another wooden plow. So can we. So should we.

We look for big things to do – Remember, on the night before he died Jesus took a towel and washed the disciple's feet.

During my years as rector of a little church in Berkeley County one of the finest and most influential men I've ever met was a gentle country doctor Dr. Will Lacey, who spent his life caring for the people of Moncks Corner and Pinopolis and all over Berkeley County. On numerous occasions Dr. Lacey told me he was paid not in cash, but in chickens and a mess of turnip greens.

Dr. Lacey reminds me of a scene in the movie Field of Dreams.

In the movie there is the character of Doc Graham played by Burt Lancaster. Doc was the local doctor of a small, backwater country town just like Dr. Lacey and often paid the same way.

As a young man Doc Graham was a very very good baseball player. His dream was to bat just one time in the major leagues. He came so very close. He was called up from the minors at the end of the season, put into the outfield late in the game, but, when it came time for his team to bat, the final out of game was made while he was standing in the on deck circle waitingwith a bat in his hands. He came so close.

As I'm sure most of you recall, the main character, Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner found this story torturing and cosmically unjust and said "*Doc, it's just tragic that you came so close to the big dream of your life to bat in the big leagues and never fulfilled it.*" Doc Graham said, "*Tragic? No. I wouldn't call it tragic. Now, not to have gone on and become a simple country doctor for this town....that would have been tragic.*"

Major point: there are many metaphorical pictures of the church that our Lord has given us, one of which is people gathered around a banquet table. But the chief picture of the church is not a banquet table, but a body. We need to understand the banquet of the Kingdom in terms of a body, not a table.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body..... But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

(1 Corinthians 12:12ff)

Just for a moment now consider the miraculous reality of your own living flesh and blood. The food that we eat and drink feeds the whole body not just part. Feel your own pulse. Be aware this very moment in time that the mysterious reality of your own life is being conveyed to you with every beat of your heart. With each drumbeat a message is being sent.

And the message is that all the different parts of your own body this very second are being nourished and enlivened by one blood. Every part shares and is kept alive by one blood. Without that one blood my brain could not send the signals my left and right hand need in order to play the guitar. And if these same hands were not open to receiving that same blood those signals would literally hit a dead end ... and there would be no music.

So you see my friends when it comes to the Kingdom of God I believe our Lord is trying to teach us the importance of asking the right question. And the right question has no more to do with the location of your specific seat in the banquet of God than it has to do with the location of your specific place in the Body of Christ.

When at a banquet do you think your life is going to be fulfilled by where you sit? No, it is going to be filled more than you can ask or imagine by the feast our host equally puts in front everyone no matter where they sit.

Likewise, whether it's in the church or not, do you think your life can ever be truly fulfilled by your position amongst your peers...by where you sit or stand in relation to others? Look, I admit to struggling like most of us with being tempted to measure the value of my life by the approval of others. But the only real peace and joy I've ever really known has come to me from the Holy Spirit. No, the right question is never *where is my position?* but *where is the Holy Spirit?* The right question is *never* how can who I am and what I do be filled with your approval, *but* how can who I am and everything I do be filled with the Holy Spirit?

It's Jubilee Sunday at St. Michael's. We set this time apart to pray for a fresh start. To pray for renewal.

Listen now to these words from Jesus in the 11th chapter of Luke's Gospel.

Jesus says, "I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are a self-centered mess, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13)

So today, I bid us one and all to take Jesus up on His offer. Go ahead and just pray. Seek the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and pray and be prayed for. Don't seek a particular *feeling*. Don't try to place a "seating chart" on your feelings. Just pray and be prayed for. Be open. And let God fulfill His promise in you in his own way.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, thanks for the invitation to include us in this family celebration. Thanks for incorporating us...for bringing us gracefully into your Body. Refresh our hearts today, Gracious Lord. Come into our midst any way you choose today. But I do ask you to come. Feed us with the food of your Holy Spirit. Let the spiritual food of your (Spirit) (Body and Blood) enter the bloodstream of our own lives. Lord, you said "how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask." Lord, it is in your name that we have the option to ask. Teach us to pray for one another. Give us the courage and the humility we need to ask...just to ask. In peace we entrust and leave all the results to You, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.