

*<sup>1</sup>One Sabbath day, when Jesus went into the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat bread, they were watching him closely.*

*<sup>7</sup>When he noticed how they were selecting the places of honor, he told the invited guests a parable. <sup>8</sup>“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline in the place of honor, or perhaps someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. <sup>9</sup>The one who invited both of you may come and tell you, ‘Give this man your place.’ Then you will begin, with shame, to take the lowest place.*

*<sup>10</sup>“But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will tell you, ‘Friend, move up to a higher place.’ Then you will have honor in the presence of all who are reclining at the table with you.*

*<sup>11</sup>“Yes, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”*

*<sup>12</sup>He also said to the one who had invited him, “When you make a dinner or a supper, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, so that perhaps they may also return the favor and pay you back.*

*<sup>13</sup>“But when you make a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup>and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. Certainly, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous.”*

My freshman year of college, I took an interpersonal communication class, and part of the class involved fine dining. The professor teaching it, the brother of Pastor Paustian, who is retired up in Escanaba and comes and fills in sometimes, told us why the fine dining portion was part of the class. When Professor Paustian was a parish pastor, he had some members who would invite him out for a fancy meal every year. It was the kind of restaurant that set multiple spoons and forks at the table and required a certain standard of dress. The good professor shared that it did not go well for him the first time, and he felt he had embarrassed himself. So, he went home and studied all the expectations and manners of fine dining.

As I sat through the fine dining portion of the class, years after my professor had adapted his behavior to the expectations of his host, I didn't see it as anything more than a fancy meal that the cafeteria had cooked up so that we could practice. But the point was not teaching the rules of fine dining. Thirteen years later and even the best restaurants or dinners I've gone to have not held such high and confusing standards. The point was adaptability. The point was to be aware of the cultures and customs of the people around you.

Awareness was certainly something lacking as Jesus watched the party guests fighting for seats. Like animals squabbling over the kill, these guests were jostling for the seats of highest

honor. Nobody thought they deserved the kids' table. They all thought they deserved the places of highest honor and were bickering with each other over who deserved the seats closest to the host and who should move down and pick a fight with the person in the next seat. There was lots of ego in the room, people who thought pretty highly of themselves.

This is how pride works though, doesn't it? It happens subtly, but people love comparing themselves to others, showing off their new toys or bragging about the honors they have received at work or in their community groups. People dote on just how well-behaved their children are, boasting about their parenting skills. Service at church becomes a point of sinful pride. Sacrifice for country in the armed forces becomes a showcase for personal glory. Why do people want to do it? Because they want to feel important and they want to prove to others that they are worthy of praise. We know that this is the way pride works because we see it and experience it.

You like the best seats in life, don't you? You like the recognition. It started when you were little kids. Mom and dad had you go tell grandma and grandpa what you had accomplished. "They'll be so happy to hear it," they said. But they were setting you up to boast. And in your boasting, they were really boasting about the kid they were raising. And of course, grandma and grandpa would go tell their friends about what their little Tommy or Susie did, keeping the boasting going further.

You grew older and started going to middle school and high school. Maybe you started noticing the opposite sex a little more. And now you had to prove yourself to the pretty girls or the handsome boys. The boys had to prove they were tough and charming, and because teenage boys lack any kind of nuance, they bragged like they were lacking a bone of humility. The girls had to prove that they were beautiful and sweet, so out came the makeup to make themselves look better and the gossip to make all other girls look worse.

You got married and started a family, and at some point, it felt like life had switched into neutral. You were stuck in a rut. So, what did you do? You bought the expensive classic car, not just because it was your dream car, but because it gave you status. It made you feel important. You started posting vacation photos with the family on Facebook, not because you wanted to share your life with friends, but because you wanted the likes and the comments: "So precious."

You got old, the kids moved out, and you told the same stories of personal heroism over and over again, trying to claw back those feelings of importance you once felt when people needed you instead of the other way around. We love the honored seats in life, don't we?

But what do we deserve? Certainly not the seats of high praise. I look out and I see a congregation made up of faithful friends, supportive spouses, patient parents, and passionate patriots. But I also know what's in your hearts, because I know what's in the hearts of every man, woman, and child. And that is the sin of selfishness. No matter what we do outwardly, we

are just as bad as anyone else, because even when we do good to our neighbors, we often do it under false pretense. We do it to be appreciated by those we serve. We do it to be seen by others and praised by those around us. And even when we don't let others see our "good works," we end up doing them so we can give ourselves a pat on the back. Down the table we go, to the very end. Past the end and on the floor. That's where we deserve to sit.

But Jesus told this parable, instructing people to sit in the lowest places, so that instead of being told, "Move down. Give this man your place," they might be told, "Friend, move up to a higher place." But Jesus was not teaching a class on fine dining in the house of this Pharisee. He was not simply telling them to be aware of those around them. Jesus was not concerned about who sat where at this or any other dinner. What he was concerned about was the attitude of pride that led to throwing elbows to get ahead. In this attitude of pride, there is no humility. And Jesus was not instructing them to fake humility to look better to others. It was his goal to humble their hearts, and that's why he raked them over the coals with this parable.

What does true humility look like? Well, I think we have the example speaking to us today. Jesus humbled himself to the lowest place. Paul writes to the Philippians: "Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." Jesus died the most humiliating death. He suffered hell alongside that death. But that wasn't fake humility. He did it for us, so that God would see us, covered in the blood of Jesus, and say to us, "Friend, move up to a higher place."

Our humility is now not an act we put on for show. It's what comes naturally when we understand and appreciate the difference between what we deserve and what God has given us. And the delta between the two cannot be calculated. We live humble lives because we have been lifted up by Christ.

As if Jesus had not bothered enough people at the party, he then turned his focus to the pharisee who had invited him: "When you make a dinner or a supper, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, so that perhaps they may also return the favor and pay you back." This Pharisee had invited Jesus so that he could get something from Jesus, namely, some quote that could be used against Jesus later to have him silenced. But all the other guests were probably invited with more friendly intentions. Still, those friendly intentions expected something in return. He'd invite his rich and powerful friends so that they could scratch each other's backs.

Jesus understands human nature better than we do, so he knows the desire to favoritize those who those who can repay generosity with generosity. Our world revolves around mutual backscratching. People keep lists of those who can help them out in this situation or that one.

But Jesus' warning here is not to focusing on benefitting those people who can benefit you back. Where is the love and sacrifice in doing something for others, just so it benefits you down the line? And yet, the people we pour most of our time into, our "guest lists" as it were, are those whose relationships seem to have the most potential for personal benefit. We think if we buddy up with someone who's rich and powerful, maybe some of their success will rub off on us. If we stay connected to someone with connections, maybe they can pull the strings for us when we need them. That's not to say you should shun rich and powerful people. God has called you to love them as neighbors just like everyone else. But if you love them for what they can provide for you, you don't actually love them. You love what they offer to you, socially, emotionally, and materially.

Our guest lists are filled with selfish picks. But who is on the Lord's guest list? As we see from the Gospels, Jesus spends his ministry primarily with the villains of society, the tramps and the robbers. His guest list is filled with those who are spiritually poor and unable to repay the debt they owe. His guest list is sinners, you and me, whom Jesus welcomes to his table freely, feeding us and forgiving us. We had nothing to offer him but selfish and empty lives, but he called us to faith, washed us of our sins, and gave our lives meaning.

Forgiven in Jesus, we now reflect his compassion toward others. We see value in those who have little to offer us in an earthly sense, because they are a soul God fashioned and made, then died for at the cross. And since we sit at the head of the table in God's kingdom, reigning with Christ, we have no problem sitting at the end of the table with all the other rejects in this life.

Jesus teaches us fine dining today, not by etiquette, but by repentance and forgiveness. As guests, we take the low places because Christ lifts us higher. As hosts, we invite the lowly because Christ invited us. In this fine dining lesson, Jesus opens our eyes and makes us aware of where we came from and who it is we have right in front of us. At this banquet in the kingdom of God, all is grace. That's the feast of fine dining. Amen.