



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, September 1, 2019

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Proverbs 25:6-7 | Psalm 112 | Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 | Luke 14:1, 7-14

We often think that, in his day, Jesus just operated on the fringes of society. He kept company with the poor, the outcast, widows and orphans, prostitutes and collaborators. All of which is true, but his message was intended for a broader audience. Today we find Jesus in the house of a leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath. The country preacher was the guest of the most prominent man in town, for the most important meal of the week. He could not have been anymore at the center of society than he was on that Saturday afternoon. And what does he do? He becomes the bull in the china shop by observing what is going on around him and simply telling the truth about what he sees.

Jesus often speaks of the kingdom of God in terms of a party with plenty to eat and drink, and room for more people than you can count. It was a potent image in a society that took parties seriously. For instance, when a wedding was celebrated the whole village was invited, not just family and close friends, everybody was included. This blanket invitation had a practical side to it. The bride's family was assured of a happy event with nothing but smiling faces all around, and the poorest family in town got a decent meal. But there was an etiquette to be observed. Seating arrangements were strict, and the rules of privilege were closely followed.

What Jesus asks us is: where would we see ourselves in a world in which the familiar rules didn't exist – where power, wealth, intelligence, good looks and good health don't count for, or get you, anything. It's hard to imagine such a situation, because we've never experienced a world remotely like that. Yet Jesus says that at his table all are treated the same, there are no differences, just people. Any honors that are handed out will be done in a way that may make no sense in the world as we know it. It will be one heck of a party.

So, what are we to do? How do we translate this into our world where rank and station provide us a role in society, a livelihood, a self-image? In order to prove our spiritual worthiness do we adopt an air of false humility and fight each other for the lowest seat in whatever forum in which we operate? Or do we hedge our bets and dismally dive for the middle, assuring ourselves that as there are always those

who rank above us, there must be those who rank below us? Neither of those responses are what Jesus is seeking from us. His uses this banquet not merely as a way to give us a lesson on humility and how we relate to our fellow human beings. Jesus is inviting us to consider our own place at his banquet table, in his home where all are welcome, including some folks we might not have ever considered.

Rank and position will have no place there, so stop obsessing about such things, and the people who do. Our invitation to Christ's banquet and our seat at his table are not based on our virtues or merits, but on the image of God implanted in all of us. Christ's gifts come when we can accept the fact that we don't deserve them any more than anyone else does.

That flies in the face of the world's rules where every point is earned or lost based on a sense of worth. To live by God's priorities is not to cultivate low self-esteem, but to allow our own God-given capacity for love, compassion and forgiveness to be nurtured and flourish. How much we grow to be as God intended us to be is the true measure of a person.

When we can take the lowest seat simply because we are satisfied with God's love, then we have found something very precious. We will have found what God meant for us all along. From there, the only direction we can move, is up.