

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 28, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7-14

“Our Place in Line”

‘Hobnobbing with the goobersmoochers’; ‘rubbing elbows with the rich and famous’; ‘networking’; call it whatever you like - this is not something that is new or unique to this day and age – people have been trying to position themselves in the ‘best of company’ to enhance themselves in society or in business for ages. People will position themselves by a celebrity or important person so that they can have a ‘photo op’, ‘photo-bomb’ or to get their viewpoint heard or even present their business proposition. We have all done it from time to time in our lives; it has been going on for ages – and sometimes we have even been the person that people want to get close to! We have all seen it at weddings, dinner parties, business meetings – you name it.

In today’s Holy Gospel Jesus is talking about the way in which people of His day were jostling for position in the eyes of God. It appeared to Jesus that they were eager to push themselves forward, to show how well they were keeping the law, to maintain their own purity and piety. They were precisely the sort of people Jesus found Himself associating with – and THEY were the wrong kind of people! Jesus is touching the untouchable and calling the nobodies. This parable is practical human wisdom - warning against pride and arrogance; warning against pushing yourself forward in the sight of Almighty God.

In Jesus' day, Jewish custom at a dinner was to arrange couches in a U shape with a low table in front of them. Guests reclined always on their left elbow, and they would be seated according to their status, with the place of honor being the seat at the center of the U. The farther away you were from that seat of honor – it lowered your status. If arrivals had placed themselves in the places of honor, and then someone more distinguished arrived, they would be asked to move to lower seats. By then, the only seat that would still be open would be the lowest place.

This wedding banquet is a picture of the Messiah's kingdom. Those who seek honor for themselves will be ‘taken down a peg’. Jesus explains that honor cannot be taken; it must be given by God. He will not honor those who seek to honor themselves!

Who are those who exalt themselves? They are the arrogant people; the ones who, in any group of people, would rather talk than listen, dominating the conversation with their own thoughts and ideas. Whatever you have to say is less important to them than what they have to say. They keep cutting you off to get back to their ideas. I keep thinking of ‘Sheldon’ on the “Big Bang Theory” – who would say ‘and now back to me!’ They consistently think everyone else is far less intelligent or important than they are. They treat people in many occupations as inferior and meant to serve only them.

So who then are the humble people? Unfortunately, some people try to give the appearance of humility in order to manipulate others, while others think that humility means putting themselves down. Truly humble people compare themselves only with Christ, realizing their

sinfulness, and understand their limitations – and the huge gap that exists between them and Our Lord Jesus. They also recognize their gifts and strengths and are willing to use them as Christ leads them. Humility is not self-degradation; it is realistic assessment and a commitment to serve. In the nearly 12 years that I have been a priest – I would meet with people who had a horrible image of themselves; and if I asked them if they liked themselves – usually the answer was no! My prayer is that they, and each one of you – the next time you look in a mirror – you would see yourself as God sees you. You are unique, you are special, and you are loved, beyond compare! That is what God sees; you are His creation; you are His child. That is not something to take lightly, my friends.

In Jesus' day, just like today, there were "status symbols" that helped people enhance and protect their high standing in society. If you were invited to the "right homes" and if you were seated in the "right places," then people would know how important you really were. The emphasis was on reputation, not character. It was more important for them to sit in the right places - than to live the right kind of life. Success that comes only from self-promotion is temporary, and you may be embarrassed as you are asked to move down.

When Jesus advised the guests to take the lowest places, He was not giving them a "gimmick" that guaranteed promotion. The false humility that takes the lowest place is just as hateful to God as the pride that takes the highest place. God is not impressed by our status in society or in the church. He is not influenced by what people say or think about us, because He sees the thoughts and motives of the heart. Just hear what God says in 1 Samuel 16:7 – *“The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* God still humbles the proud and exalts the humble. The Lord reminds us in James 4:6 *“That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*”

It has been said that humility is not thinking less of us, it is simply not thinking of ourselves at all. Jesus is the greatest example of humility, and we would do well to ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to imitate Him. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:3-11 in which he writes: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* Powerful words!

Jesus knew that the host had invited his guests for two reasons:

- to pay them back because they had invited him to past feasts, or

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 28, 2016, Year C

- to put them under his debt so that they would invite him to future feasts or events.

This kind of hospitality was not an expression of love and grace but rather an evidence of pride and selfishness. He was "buying" recognition. In our Lord's time, it was not considered proper to ask poor people and handicapped people to public banquets. The women were not invited either! But Jesus commanded us to put these needy people at the top of our guest list *because they cannot pay us back*. If our hearts are right, God will see to it that we are properly rewarded, though getting a reward must not be the motive for our generosity. When we serve others from unselfish hearts, we are laying up treasures in heaven and becoming "rich toward God."

Today's modern world is very competitive, and it is easy for God's people to become more concerned about profit and loss than they are about sacrifice and service. "What will *I* get out of it?" or even better – "What's in it for *me*?" I remember the movie "Field of Dreams" in which Shoeless Joe Jackson is about to tell Ray Kinsella the purpose for all of the things that have been happening to him; building that field, going to Boston, and getting James Earl Jones – who plays Terrance Mann. But then He sees Mann going out into the cornfield and his reaction is 'how come he's going out there?' Shoeless Joe Jackson then says 'so what you are saying is what's in it for me?' With that Kevin Costner (Ray Kinsella) says 'no – what I am saying is ... what's in it for me?' In other words he wanted to know what it was all about – ahead of time. He wanted to know what the 'bottom line' would be! That might easily become someone's most important question in their life. We must attempt to maintain the unselfish attitude that Jesus had and share what we have with others.

On the Day of Judgment, many who today are first in the eyes of men will be last in God's eyes, and many who are last in the eyes of men will be first in the eyes of God. It is not about our place in line!