

“Humble Acceptance”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17C) -- 27 & 28 August 2016  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

At first glance, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet looks like Jesus is giving strategic advice Jesus on how to win the approval of others. Avoid the mistake of sitting too close to the host, just in case somebody more distinguished than you got an invitation as well. Instead, take your seat as far down the table as you dare, preferably at the kiddie table, in hopes that your host will notice and invite you to move up higher. Such exaggerated etiquette helps keep you clear from a potentially embarrassing miscalculation, while opening up the opportunity to look good in front of the other guests. It almost seems Jesus was channeling Emily Post amped up on steroids two millennia before her time.

If we understand the story solely on its surface, what we have is a ploy to curry favor. Pretend to be humble, in the hope that you will be publicly exalted. Of course, Jesus meant quite the opposite. He scorned fake humility designed for gain. Jesus designed parables to take us through the surface and into the depths where a greater meaning awaits. In this case, Jesus used a touch irony on the surface to expose what’s lurking underneath, namely the true humility he invites us to exercise in the Kingdom of God. The wedding banquet is simply an analogy for that Kingdom. God serves as the powerful and beneficent host, and all of us are the guests.

However, the idea of humility proves very confusing, very challenging to grasp in our culture. We live in an ultra-competitive world. We adore Olympians, especially the ones that wind up with medals around their necks, and scarcely think twice about professional athletes earning millions of dollars, in part because they exemplify the ideal of competition. Closer to home, we’ve all probably endured an obnoxious parent at a child’s sporting event. This past

spring at one of Emma's track meets, a woman standing next to us was ripping her daughter to shreds. Apparently, for some people winning means more than anything, including a person's dignity. And that's just sports.

We compete for jobs, promotions, pay raises, clients, placements in the best schools and scholarships to help pay. Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with competition. In fact, I can't see a more reliable way to identify excellence and reward the most worthy. However, competition tends to breed, if we're not very careful, an infectious sense of pride. And pride is the self-satisfaction we enjoy from feeling superior to others. It's not enough to say, "We won," and leave it at that. We speak of how we "beat them," and to beat someone implies an act of violence.

Pride and humility are polar opposites. Each exists within us in varying degrees. To the extent we are prideful, we cannot be humble, and humility drives out pride. Pride also presents a second difficulty that makes it harder to be humble, and that's the experience of being humiliated by proud people. For those who have been publicly humiliated, the idea of being humble elicits a visceral response.

When I was a junior in high school, I auditioned for All-State Band, along with about 150 other trumpet players from across Kentucky. We did it at Oldham County High School, I still get a little nervous when I drive by the place. You wait several hours to play for three or four minutes in front of three judges hidden behind a sheet, and then you wait another several hours for everybody else to finish, until the moment of truth, when sheets of paper with names on them are taped to a wall. That year, my name showed up seventh from the top, which basically meant that on that particular day, I was deemed by three judges to be the seventh best high school trumpet player in all of Kentucky. I felt very proud. I beat a lot of people that day.

The prize you win is a week of lip-bruising rehearsal under the demanding baton of an esteemed college maestro, culminating in a concert at the Kentucky Center for the Arts in downtown Louisville. They send you the music in advance, and you practice it like crazy, because it's the toughest music you've ever played, and nobody wants to be embarrassed. We all wanted to prove that we belonged there, that our presence in that room wasn't a fluke.

Out of the many pages of music I mastered, there were two weird measures I just couldn't get a handle on, no matter how hard I tried, and my deficiency did not go unnoticed by the conductor. After several failed attempts to get it right in rehearsal, the conductor pointed straight at me and screamed, in front of about 120 other high school students, "If you can't play it right, fake it! That seems to be what you're best at anyway," and that's the PG version of what he said to me. It made me feel like I didn't belong in that room, everyone's worst nightmare, and it was, at that point, the most humiliating experience of my life. It still ranks in the top five. (At this point, I'd like to reassure our high school musicians who aspire to All-State Band that this was over 25 years ago, the guy was very old back then, so you probably don't have to worry about running into him.) (Oh, and about the audition, once you've thrown up, it's all downhill from there.)

For years afterwards, the idea of being humble nauseated me, because humility and humiliation had become fused together in my mind, but later I learned that nothing could be further from the truth. And when I had that epiphany, I was able to forgive him. Humiliation is an act of violence a proud person inflicts on you. It violates a person's dignity. Humility is a virtue you cultivate within yourself by the grace of God. The first brings pain. The second brings peace. Be aware of the difference and realize that true humility has the power to heal the humiliations you suffer in life.

The final reason we find it hard to be humble is that we confuse humility with false modesty. We reject compliments with self-deprecation. We pretend to be less than we are. That's not humility. That's self-deception fostered from a sense of unworthiness. Accept that God made you wonderful, and honor others by accepting the honors they bestow on you. Allow people the joy of appreciating how you're special. Dump false modesty. It's nothing holy.

So competition and the pride that often comes with it; humiliation and the fear of not belonging it brings; the sense of being unworthy, of not being good enough: these are the things that distort our understanding of real humility and prevent us from being truly humble. How do we evade these common experiences and learn to lead a humble life?

Understand this. Mark it well. The Kingdom of God represents a radical reversal from the roles and realities of the world around us, and that can be very disturbing, very disorienting, so much so that it's tempting to stay where we are, how we are, and shuffle the Kingdom into a corner of our life, a place we visit from time to time, skimming the surface but rarely going deep, taking what we can, but rarely receiving what we need. God's Kingdom is raw and untamed and will take over your life if you give it half a chance. So be ready.

In the Kingdom of God, compassion, not competition, reigns supreme. We don't need to earn God's love. We can't. It's freely given, without concern for circumstance, performance, or success. In the Kingdom of God, there's no room for pride, because there's no room for feeling superior. All are equal before God, from the holiest saint to the most miserable sinner, and I don't know about you, but that comes as a great relief to me. Unlike this world, which tries to nudge us aside, make us feel defective, and tells us that we don't belong, in the Kingdom, God insists, "You belong in the room. You belong at the table. You belong to me."

When you accept in your heart that you belong to God, when you accept that God accepts you unconditionally, and that nothing but grace makes that possible, then you are humble, and you will experience the world in a whole new way. Peace. Joy. Wisdom. Hope. Words we use a lot around here, words that could be explained ceaselessly, but only the experience of them leads to comprehension, and the experience of those blessings come through God's love poured into humble hearts that have responded in faith to God's choice to make us citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Be humble by accepting God's acceptance of you. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In this verse, Jesus referred primarily to himself. He foreshadowed the humble death that he would suffer on the cross, the sacrifice that made possible his exaltation. As witnesses to both events, the horrible crucifixion and the amazing resurrection, how can we be anything other than humble, brought to our knees in adoration at the fierce yet tender love that never dies? Amen.