

Luke 14:1, 7-14

It's almost football season. Pre-season games have begun, and the regular games are about to begin. Josh Allen, Patrick Mahomes, Tom Brady, Joe Burrows... If you watch NFL games those names will sound familiar. Do you remember Jim Thorpe? He was the most famous athlete of his time, able to run with speed and power as well as pass, catch, punt and kick. After leading the Canton Bulldogs to three unofficial world championships, he became the first president of the National Football League.

By the way, he also played six seasons of major-league baseball and won two gold medals in the 1912 Olympics. King Gustav V of Sweden honored him during the closing ceremonies by saying, "You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world." Thorpe replied, "Thanks, King." A humble man indeed!

Jesus also was humble. He had no patience with prolonged and excessive celebrations. When going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, he said, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down in the place of honor" (v. 8). Don't assume that you are the greatest student, artist, or athlete, in the world, which is what so many people seem to think.

Jesus knows that someone more distinguished than you might show up, which would cause your host to come to you and say, "Give this person your place," forcing you to take a walk of shame and go to the lowest place (vv. 8-9). That would be very awkward.

Instead, says Jesus, "When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you" (v. 10). This kind of behavior is not a sign of arrogance. Instead, it puts you in the Humility Hall of Fame, a concept which is sort of an oxymoron, and illogical.

Of course, what our culture is teaching is really quite different. Children want trophies for participating in sports, not just for winning tournaments. Parents expect their kids to be admitted to Ivy League colleges, even though only one in ten will get in. Basketball players go to prestigious universities not because they want a first-class education, but because they want to play a year and then jump to the NBA. And what about reality television, full of people who become famous for being outrageous, not for any skills or talents or achievements. The Real Housewives of "fill in the blank" with a city..., Jersey Shore, The Bachelor, Keeping Up with the Kardashians – these belong in the Arrogance Hall of Fame.

Jesus makes a prediction that should be heeded by the stars of reality television, some athletes, and by all of us: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 11).

Remember George McGovern? He was a United States Senator who will long be remembered as the Democrat who lost to Republican Richard Nixon in one of the most lopsided defeats in presidential history. Because he opposed the war in Vietnam, he was painted by some as a cowardly left-winger.

McGovern was no coward. In truth, he was a decorated bomber pilot in World War II, a man who served his country bravely and well. His staff urged him to talk more about his war experience, but like so many veterans he was reluctant to do so. He described himself as the son of a Methodist minister; a "good old South Dakota boy" who went off to war; a man who had been "married to the same woman forever." In short, he was humble.

Maybe that humility served him well, because at the end of his life he was awarded the World Food Prize along with Republican Senator Bob Dole. They worked together to strengthen global school feeding, nutrition, and education programs. They jointly proposed a program to provide poor children with meals at schools.

George McGovern and Bob Dole. Democrat and Republican. Both fought in World War II. Both ran for president and lost. But they are not, in any sense, losers. Losers do not work together, quietly, and effectively, to provide meals to 22 million hungry children. Let's put them in the Humility Hall of Fame. Even if they are politicians.

Jesus certainly has concern for feeding the hungry, especially those who have no way to repay our generosity. He says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid" (v. 12).

That hits close to home, doesn't it? Most of us give luncheons or dinners for precisely the groups that Jesus mentions: Friends, family members, relatives, neighbors. We enjoy feeding them and then being fed by them.

But Jesus says to go a different direction. Think of hungry children, whether there are two, or 22 million. "When you give a banquet," he says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (vv. 13-14).

Feed those who cannot repay you, commands Jesus. The poor who live in cheap motels without kitchens. The crippled who have trouble entering most rooms with their wheelchairs. The lame who need to have meals brought to them. The blind who are often stuck at home because travel is so difficult. But I don't think this is a really popular past time among Americans. According to the Meals on Wheels America website in many areas of the country, the need for meals far exceeds the resources available to provide them, leading to wait lists and/or being turned away. Across America there are about 2 million volunteers. That number sounds great, doesn't it?

Not when it's compared to 159 million NFL fans in America. A sports poll of the American public conducted last September found that 57 percent of Americans follow pro football. It *is* falling in popularity, in 2013 59 percent watched the pro sport, however, according to the poll done last September, there are 410 million football fans worldwide. It is the greatest past time of all times.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we ought to have a problem with that. Not that we should boycott the NFL and refuse to cheer for our favorite team, but instead we should work a little harder to make Christianity the most popular institution in the land. One that focuses on the poor. One that heals the crippled. One that supports the lame and the blind.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is a countercultural game to play, one that is based on the belief that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 11). Anything we do to serve others without expectation of a payback will be seen as a success in the eyes of Jesus, and will move us closer to the Humility Hall of Fame -- or, in the words of Scripture, to "the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 14). Once inside, we won't unduly draw attention to ourselves. But we might turn to Jesus and simply say, "Thanks, King."

All glory be to God.