

## XIV Pentecost (17c)

Lk 14.1,7-14

29 August 2010

St. Stephen's &amp; St. Alban's

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My undergraduate education was accomplished (at least to the degree it was indeed accomplished) at Hampden-Sydney College – a very small, very traditional liberal arts in rural southside Virginia. As I say, Hampden-Sydney was and remains very traditional, so much so that it has not yet gotten around to anything so new-fangled as admitting women to the student body. So traditional, that before matriculating, incoming freshman were issued a small booklet entitled *To Manner Born, to Manners Bred: a Guide to Etiquette for the Hampden-Sydney Gentleman* – which is pretty amazing in this day and age, and, in my opinion, delightfully retrograde.

The *Guide* covers all the usual etiquette sorts of things, from responding to formal invitations, to how to dress for different occasions, to the all important difference between a butter knife and a butter spreader. It has been many years since I've seen a copy of the *Guide*, but I still remember the last line, which doubtless was a quotation from some other source: “The presumption of privilege is the purest of bad manners.”

*The presumption of privilege is the purest of bad manners.* There's a great deal of wisdom in that statement, and, as it happens, the “presumption of privilege” is an issue our Lord addresses in this morning's Gospel lesson. But if the presumption of privilege, seen from the point of view of social norms, is bad manners (because it is snobbery), from a spiritual point of view, as our Lord shows us, it is much worse. It is in fact to define oneself out of the company of the Redeemed.

In this morning's lesson, our Lord is at a dinner party given by a *ruler who belonged to the Pharisees*, and he notices how some others of those invited rush and jostle one another for the best seats – which means not those seats closest to the dessert table (which is where my sights are usually set), but rather they raced for the *places of honor*, those places nearest the host, those seats that indicated elevated social, economic, or religious privilege (and of course those three soften seem to go together). They wanted seats that testified of their status above others. We still know the phrase “below the salt,” a leftover from medieval England when salt was a much more rare and precious commodity than it is today. Then the nobility sat and ate at the “high” table in the great hall, the only table with a salt cellar, while the commoners ate at trestle tables beneath the high table, or “below the salt.”

Jesus sees this jostling for position and foresees the embarrassment surely to come. After all, the host, in keeping with his duties, will have to sort all this out, and inevitably some of those who had taken for themselves a place of honor will be asked, to their shame, to yield their seats to those of greater status. So Jesus combines for himself the roles of Emily Post and Ann Landers and begins to offer a little advice: Why not begin by taking the lowest place? You will avoid the shame of having to move from a more honored position, and it may even be that the host will come to you and in the sight of the other guests say, “Friend, go up higher.”

But of course Jesus is not really concerned with how to navigate the rocky shoals of a society supper. He is after something infinitely more important. And he has taken the opportunity of the dinner party and the mad scramble for social status to illustrate an important spiritual and eschatological truth: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,” he says categorically, “and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In other words, there will one great day come a great sorting out, and it may be – in fact it will be – the case that our great and almighty Host will assign the places of honor in a fashion foreign and actually completely opposite to our usual worldly manner of estimating these things.

In this dinner party scramble, then, we have some insight into the nature of the deadly sin of Pride. As the dinner guests race for the best seats, the places of honor, we see that at its withered heart, Pride is essentially competitive. C.S. Lewis has an excellent consideration of Pride in his book *Mere Christianity*, and he puts it like this: we tend to think that people are proud of being rich, or intelligent, or good-looking. But that's not actually the case. In fact, they are proud of being more rich, more intelligent, better looking than others. The pleasure for the dinner guests will come in looking down at those in the lesser places, those seated "below the salt." Pride thrives on comparison.

And so you see immediately one of the reasons Pride is so deadly. Its pleasure comes in looking down at those we have bested, but the problem is that there will always be someone with more and better: more money, more smarts, more beauty, more whatever. Pride lands one in a competition, but it never ends; there is no winner, and there is no rest.

If that is the disease – if our narcissistic obsession with rank and status, with comparison, will keep us from the final exaltation – what, then, is the cure?

Well, I think Jesus points the way in this second bit of social advice he gives. He has shown us a strategy for guests, but now he turns to the host. Here is how to throw a really excellent dinner party, he says: Don't invite your relatives and your rich neighbors and the other usual suspects. And why? *Lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid.* The really good host, according to Jesus, invites those who have no capacity of returning the favor – *the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.* The excellent host feeds and honors those who of themselves have nothing, nothing to offer in return, nothing but gratitude for a mercy received.

Now there is an obvious application to be made there, and I'm going to make it in just a second. But first, how is it that this good host, this really excellent host, can afford, socially speaking, to have a guest list like this, to associate himself with society's losers and leftovers? Won't that ruin his own social standing? Well, he can do it because this host, this Ideal Host, is absolutely secure in his own position. Unlike the scrambling guests at the Pharisee's dinner party, this Host is not worried about comparison. Which teaches us something else about pride, and in turn, about God. Namely, that God himself is not proud. Again, I can't put it any better or clearer than C.S. Lewis; he wrote:

*We must not think Pride is something God forbids because He is offended at it, or that Humility is something He demands as due to His own dignity – as if God Himself was proud. He is not in the least worried about His dignity. The point is, He wants you to know Him: wants to give you Himself. And He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble - delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life.*

So, Jesus has shown us, here is the path to a place of honor at the only dinner party that counts. Simply to recognize that God is in no way ennobled by being so lucky as to have a guest like me. Just the opposite. But God delights to honor *the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.* He invites them, and he exalts them.

The way to escape the remorseless treadmill of Pride is to find our security, our dignity, our status, not in relative merits when compared with others, but in the solid and eternal fact that we are the objects of god's love and mercy, and that in Christ we have a place of honor – not of our own deserving but of his grace.

And – what do you know? – here we are this morning at a dinner party. It is a foretaste of the great Wedding Supper of the Lamb. And so we must ask ourselves, on what basis do we presume to come to this table? Do we presume privilege; are we trusting in our own righteousness? Are we one of those kinsmen or rich neighbors who think we may come because we have something to offer in return? Or, do we come trusting in his manifold and great mercies? Are we the spiritually poor and lame, in the lowest place, to whom our Lord extends a hand and says, “Friend, go up higher”?

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