

“How to Become Exalted?”

Luke 14:7-14

September 1, 2019

12th Sunday After Pentecost

I have a cartoon which shows the door to the office of a pastor. As with the the office doors of many professional people (doctors, lawyers, and the like), this door identified its occupant by name and qualifications. It said: Pastor William S. Smith III – B.A., M.Div., Th.D., Ph.D., D.D., D.Lit. and your humble servant. We laugh at the obvious self-promotion of the pastor and at the contradiction between that self-promotion and the closing words, “your humble servant.” There seems to be nothing humble nor serving in that pastors view of himself. We also laugh because, like in most comedy, there is a grain of truth in the humor or it would not be funny.

This man is not alone in thinking highly of himself while, at the same time, pretending to be humble. It is a common malady, not only in the lives of unbelievers, but also in the life of those who claim Christ as Savior. In the Gospel readings for the next couple of weeks, we are going to hear some very difficult words from our Lord about our lives as Christians – words that we either have to ignore at our own peril or take to heart with some serious change required in our lives.

Although we would like to think of ourselves as humble and serving people, the fact of the matter is that, because of our sinful human nature, we are often proud and self-serving people. This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were not satisfied with being creatures served by God, but instead wish to be like God Himself and to be in charge.

In our text, Jesus shows us two ways in which people are a bit arrogant and self-serving. In the first example, Jesus talks about trying to get the best for ourselves at the expense of others. He uses the example of the wedding feast where many people, feeling self-important or simply thinking of themselves, make a mad dash to get the best seat in the house.

Although choosing the best seat in the front might not be an understandable example for us Lutherans who always like to sit in the back, there may be plenty of times in which you have tried to get the best for yourself at the expense of someone else. It may mean getting for ourselves the best place in line, the best seat at a performance, the best table at a dinner, the best “bargain” not available to others, and so on. The point is not that any of these things are sinful to have (just as it was not wrong to have the best seat in the wedding feast in the text). The point is our selfish desire to get things for ourselves because we think we are more deserving and others are less.

The other example has to do with giving in order to get. In our text, Jesus says to the host of the meal where he was eating, “when you serve dinner or a banquet don’t invite your friends are your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors.” Jesus is not talking about the action, but the motivation behind it. There was certain social etiquette which existed back then and even to some extent in our country here until recently which said that, once you had been invited to somebody’s house for dinner, you were obligated to return the favor and invite them over to your house for dinner. So, some

people would extend social invitations to other people simply because they felt they would be entitled to a return invitation.

I doubt whether that exists today in very strong force. However, the practice of doing something or giving something in order to get something may still exist among us. I think of Christmas gift lists as an example. Have you ever given a gift to someone, not out of love, but because you felt you owed it because they gave one to you? Did you ever give any sort of gift, not to benefit the recipient, but with the hope that you might get a nice gift in return? I doubt if anybody would admit to that, but I'm betting that this attitude exists. It is not true love, but a business transaction. You do for me and I'll do for you.

All of this behavior in Jesus' two examples is something we would call self-promotion. The Bible calls it exalting oneself. Jesus has a stern warning for this common behavior. He says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled."

In the first example, the ones who tried to get the best seats for themselves will be humbled by being humiliated when the host of the feast comes to them and says, "Give your place to this person," and then takes you to the lowest place where you will be humiliated, not only because of the seat you end up in, but also because everyone saw it happen to you.

In the second example, social transactions made to look like enjoyable events will be severely criticized by our Lord. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means not just doing what social practice requires. It means doing more. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had said, "And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount." (Luke 6:33-34) There is nothing inherently Christian about just giving to others or doing good to others. Even sinners will do that when the motivation is to get something in return.

The problem here is that promoting ourselves will never work with God. Exalting ourselves by climbing over other people will never get us to God. "All have sinned and fallen short of God," says the Scripture. Not only will exalting ourselves not get us closer to God, it will cause us to be humbled by God. The implication is that we will be rejected by and even cut off from Him. Life in the kingdom of God is very different than life in the kingdom of this world. Seeking self and serving self, the origin and source of sin, is not part of the kingdom of God, nor will those who practice it gain admittance to the kingdom of God.

Our only hope is not found by trusting our attempts at exalting ourselves only to be humbled by and cut off from God, but in trusting the one who humbled Himself only to be exalted by God. In other words, reverse the order. The only way to salvation is not in exalting and then humbling, but in humbling and then exalting. The only person who ever did that was our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus had every right to exalt Himself. He is the Son of God. Morally, He is perfect and deserving of every honor and glory. In terms of might, He is certainly able to take anything that He wanted or deserved. Yet, in that famous passage from Philippians, St. Paul writes, "[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count

equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus did not have to grab honor for Himself. He already had it all. He did not have to give in order to get because everything already belongs to Him. He did not have to try to become God. He already is God. He is completely and utterly deserving of exultation.

However, His great love for you and me motivated Him to lay aside the exultation He had as God and humble Himself. This means far more than the fact that the Son of God left His divine throne in heaven and was born as a human being in the peasant village of Bethlehem. Rather, it means that He humbled himself to the will of His Father. He came to this earth, not as a powerful king to be served, but as a weak servant. He came, not to conquer this earth with military might and establish an earthly kingdom, but He came to save this earth by offering His life for the forgiveness of all sin for all people and to establish His kingdom in the hearts and lives of people. This is a complete humbling, something we may fear and avoid at all costs, but which Jesus embraced and deliberately took on.

Because of that humbling of self, God exalted Jesus. St. Paul goes on to say in that passage from Philippians, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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." (Philippians 2:9-11) Because Jesus humbled Himself, God exalted Him. And because God exalted Him, Jesus earned the right for us to be exalted.

Jesus' self humbling (rather than self-promotion) ended Him up on a cross. There, He paid the cost and endure the punishment for all sin. There, He earned the forgiveness for each of our sin. By Jesus' perfect life in our place, we have His perfection. By Jesus' death in our place, we have God's forgiveness. This means that, in God's eyes, we are already perfect. He has declared you and me to be holy and righteous in His sight.

And do you know what that means? We don't have to promote ourselves. We don't have to exalt ourselves. We don't have to get for ourselves, at the expense of others. We don't have to give in order to get. We stand in the presence of God, having everything and lacking nothing. We have forgiveness. We have holiness. We have new life, now and in the life to come. Promoting ourselves or exalting ourselves is not only foolish and sinful, it's totally unnecessary.

Just to make sure you understand that and are comforted by it, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead – the ultimate example of exultation - and made him to sit at His right hand. God the Father was pleased with His Son's self-humbling and for what He accomplished. The resurrection of the dead is proof of that. The return in judgment will be the implementation of that.

You and I are free from having to compete with others for God's love, His blessing, His gifts, or even His salvation. We are free to be servants. This may sound

contradictory, but it's not. God has freed us from the guilt and punishment for our sin. He has freed us to humble ourselves and serve others in gratitude and love. In the verses immediately preceding St. Paul's writing about the humility and exultation of Jesus, Paul writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4

in the examples given by Jesus in our text today, this humility, followed by exultation, is shown. Regarding seats of honor at a wedding feast, Jesus advises you to pick the lowest of seats so that, when the host of the feast sees you there, he will lead you to a place of honor. With regard to inviting guests to a banquet and making sure that you are not doing it for the sake of a return invitation, Jesus says to not invite your friends, family, and good people, but those who can't invite you back. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and all of the social outcasts who cannot possibly pay you back. Jesus promises blessing and repayment at the resurrection of the just.

For us, it's the same thing. Do not spend time and energy seeking to get things at the expense of others. Don't even worry about it. Perhaps, when doing that, someone else will give you those good things. You don't have to get them yourselves. And to free yourselves from the cycle of giving in order to get, simply give to those who you know can't possibly pay you back. Then you can simply joyfully serve.

In terms of your relationship with God, don't try to exalt yourselves with great good deeds, large financial gifts, or other things which call attention to yourselves in order to impress God and gain salvation. You are freed from that. You are free to serve without thought of getting anything in return. And God will exalt you to His heavenly kingdom.

The title of the sermon, "How to Become Exalted" sounds like the title of a self-help book from your local bookstore. It sounds as if there is a 12 step program for what you must do to become exalted or important. Quite frankly, it sounds like a lot of work. Such impressions would be wrong. It is not about exalting yourself or doing lots of things to impress God. Becoming exalted is not a result of following the list of do's and don'ts. Rather, "how to become exalted" is by trusting the One who, gave His life on a cross, and was exalted by His Father to the highest point of heaven. By Jesus' humbling of Himself, you not only shall be exalted. You already are and will be forever. Amen.