

Luke 14:1,7-14 – “True Humility” – Aug 28/16

Last Monday I had an excuse to drive over to Osoyoos and back. Most people from BC think that's an insane adventure, but for those of us who grew up in northern towns think nothing of a four or five-hour drive to shop or for a meeting and then return the same day. My excuse for this road trip was that I bought online a replacement 'kicker' outboard motor for the boat. The motor was right, the price was right, and with Elizabeth up on Savary for two weeks I had an opportunity to satisfy my craving for some on-the-road-diner food (I still miss the Husky restaurant in New Liskeard!) I left at 6:00 am, had a great breakfast in Hope at a family restaurant I first ate at in 1972, made it to Osoyoos before 11:30, closed the deal, and headed back. On the return leg I stopped at another family restaurant in Princeton ... food was pretty good but the servers were overwhelmed with customers.

It's been a great few weeks for eating. In the last week of July Elizabeth and I spent five days at the Semiahmoo Resort near Blaine, across the border in Washington State. Great getaway ... found a fabulous schnitzel house in Everson, a great Mexican restaurant in 'downtown' Blaine, a neat little breakfast spot and a superb oyster bar across the street. I'm sad to report that my exercise program is not burning up nearly enough calories to cope with all this eating ... I'll have to start incorporating the only exercise that works for losing weight: it's called the "Pushback Exercise", so named because it consists of pushing back from the table!

Now, I'm sorry if all of this talk about food just before lunch has you drooling, but eating comes to mind because our gospel reading for this morning also relates to food. Many of you will be familiar with this reading, or at least with the first part of it. Jesus – watching people gathering for a meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees – is moved by their unseemly behaviour to tell them a parable in two parts. The first part is to the guests, obviously triggered by him noting their scrambling for the most important seats at the table. The second part is directed to hosts, perhaps less obviously also triggered by seeing who was doing the scrambling.

It's easy to imagine that first scene, isn't it? Easy, perhaps, because I suspect we've all seen such behaviour – but of course we will all enthusiastically deny that we have been ever been involved in jostling for positions of honour. Indeed, the desire by Christians not to be seen as scrambling for positions of honour has turned so far the opposite direction that it has become almost a mirror image of what Jesus was describing. I don't mean only the revered custom of the rearmost seats in the Sanctuary as being the seats of honour, although that does tend to be one example of how Jesus' teaching has been turned upside-down. It doesn't take too much imagination to conjure up a Monty Python kind of scene in which some wondrously bizarre images emerge of Christians all scrambling for the seats at the bottom of the table, all with faces expectantly turned toward the host eagerly (but oh-ever-so-politely) making "pick me, Jesus" faces, hoping to be chosen as one of the more important and asked to move up the table.

But of course we recognize that Jesus was talking about more than just a scramble for seats at a table; indeed he was talking about more than just good etiquette or good manners. By setting these instructions into a parable Jesus signaled to the people at that supper, and to us, that he was talking in much broader terms. Jesus was pointing out how actions reveal the real values that people hold, as contrasted to the values they profess – in a sense "you are defined by what you do, not by what you say you believe."

At the heart of what Jesus was driving at is the noble concept of self-denial, the ability to tell yourself "no". Sadly our society increasingly exhibits the opposite of this kind of self-control in a particularly nasty form of narcissism, namely an all-too-abundant sense of entitlement. Examples of exorbitant spending of others' money by politicians abound in the media, examples ranging from sheer "nose-in-the-trough" greed to flagrant displays of "I'm owed this!" Executives in corporations, nowhere more so than in financial or finance-related

industries, are experts at rationalizing pampering themselves. Executive Directors of non-profits are as guilty as anyone, clearly evidenced by the salaries and perks even or especially among those in the “Poverty Industry” in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Clergy are not immune either with abundant examples of millionaire pastors of mega-churches down to those who whittle and pare for compensation for every last penny on bus fares. What’s much more frightening to me is that we are now into the third generation of people who were deliberately not told “no” while children, following some trendy but very ill-advised (and later recanted!) advice from a Doctor whose initials are, appropriately enough, “B.S.” The really sad part is that learning the concept of “no” is easy and appropriate for young children as they develop, but it is a hugely painful process when it inevitably happens as an adult. If you think I’m exaggerating all you have to do is listen to the whining from a young Millennial who can’t understand why their first job won’t be as Vice President or CEO!

So, Jesus has some difficult and uncomfortable advice for those who would follow him. It’s bad enough to be embarrassed in public by being asked to move down to your proper place, but to understand that Jesus is talking about being reprimanded by God for assuming a greater self-worth than is appropriate makes the serious listener very, very uncomfortable. It’s easy to see how Christians who pay attention to this message can so easily move to adopt a self-effacing style of behaviour, humbling themselves in the hope of being called to move forward to a more prominent place in the kingdom. They focus upon Jesus’ summary of the first part of his teaching, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” and try to follow that principle.

It would seem at first glance that this is an easy formula for a way to be exalted ... simply humble yourself. Sounds easy if you say it fast, “know your place - humble yourself.” But there’s a danger here, a dangerous trap of putting on a highly public “I am not worthy, Lord” cloak of humility, failing to grasp that the very public nature of the cloak defeats the whole purpose of being humble. One of the examples of this that often gives me pause is the use of the word ‘just’ in public prayer ... “Lord, we just ask that you would ...” as if we are so insignificantly humble that we feel we shouldn’t even be bothering God with our petitions, and we don’t want to ask too much.

Jesus was aware of that trap, and was careful to add some instruction on just what he meant by being humble. Unfortunately, many faithful Christians fail to continue reading and miss hearing the specific instruction that forms the second part of the parable. That second part is directed to “the one who had invited him” – “who had invited him.” How much clearer can the signal be that this message is to those who have invited Christ into their lives? – and is directed to the faithful, to us, laying out and defining exactly what it means to humble yourself.

So what was that definition of true humility? Jesus defined it with his statement, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, don’t invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours ... [instead,] 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.” Ahhh, now there’s a definition of true humility. Not gathering together to look piously humble – or is it humbly pious? – but instead with sincere deeds and actions all done without any expectation of reward except in heaven. We can give thanks to God that many, many faithful Christians have heard this instruction, have listened to the second part, and who live out their faith in just this way, offering themselves in quiet service.

I keep coming back to use the term “second part” of this teaching because I think it’s vitally important to recognize that we have a dual role in our faith. All of us understand our role as guests at the great feast and banquet provided by Christ in his body and his blood – that Holy Communion is at the heart and foundation of our faith. But we need to understand that we are

also invited to be hosts. We are called by Christ to invite others to this banquet on his behalf. We are not merely the guests addressed in the first part, we are the hosts addressed in the second part, and we need to understand that how we fulfill our role as hosts defines the nature of the humility we adopt in our role as guests. The key to the definition of our life-giving humbling ourselves lies in the nature of the invitation we offer to others.

Now that puts an understanding on this passage that is somewhat different from the common understanding today, doesn't it? Far removed from the practicing of "I am not worthy" or even worse "I am more not-worthy than you" in selected gatherings of friends, relatives, and others in the congregation is this understanding that we will find ultimate exaltation from Christ in offering invitations to come join us at his table to those who have no way to repay us. Just as there is no way that we can repay God for his gift of grace and mercy in Christ Jesus and yet we are invited to his table, we are expected in turn to freely invite others to the same table. We are not called to do it for recognition, or glory, or pats on the back, or congratulations, even though those feel awful good. Any gratitude for doing so is to God, not us.

We are guests at the Lord's Table, but we are hosts also. We need to know that our place is here – and to help others know their place is here also. We don't need to pretend this is a five-star restaurant and wear fancy waiter's tails and morning coats or become all gushing and gooey. The banquet to which we are honoured to invite people in Christ's name is the ultimate dining experience because of God's grace. All that we are called to do is to ensure that everyone who visits or attends here feels welcome, feels special, and feels like a wanted guest. All we need do is humbly say, "Welcome, friend ... we're glad you've come ... here, move on up, have a good seat ... join us at this heavenly feast!"