

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Proverbs 25:6-7 (NIV)

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; 7) it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.

Dear people of God;

I always enjoy wedding receptions – it's a great opportunity to visit with the family and friends of the couple who was married. But there's something that's often a bit confusing for me – I'm never quite sure where to sit.

Sometimes the couple has a place for the pastor at the head table with the wedding party; sometimes they have a special table for the grandparents and the pastor is asked to sit there, sometimes there is no special place and I'm free to sit at any table. It really doesn't make a difference to me – it's just that I don't want to end up sitting in the wrong the place.

Sometimes there are name tags on the tables – that's nice. Then all I have to do is casually look at the names on the tables to see if there's a place for me. But sometimes there are no name tags – that's when it's confusing. Sometimes I just wait until someone from the wedding party or family tells me about the seating arrangements. But most often I end up just finding a seat for myself.

Guests at a wedding are usually asked to return a reply card to the couple to let them know that they will be attending their wedding reception. That way the couple will be sure that there will be a place for them at the reception.

Our Gospel lesson for today, as well as our OT sermon text, refer to seating accommodations at a feast or a banquet. Especially as we consider the Gospel lesson we realize that these lessons are not just giving some practical advice about wedding etiquette. The Gospel lesson makes it clear that Jesus is talking about seats at the heavenly wedding feast. As we consider our OT lesson in the light of Jesus' words you will be reminded that

Theme: There's a place in Christ's Kingdom for you

1. In humility confess your unworthiness.
2. In humility wait for him to exalt you.

It would be an honor, wouldn't it, to be invited to a reception at the White House. Most likely, we would want to brush up on our manners and the proper protocol for guests at such an event. That's the kind of situation described in our text for today – a royal banquet in the presence of the king. Sadly, sometimes people lose their heads in situations like that and end up having an inflated opinion of themselves. That can lead to some rather embarrassing behavior as our text for today suggests: **Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; 7) it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.**

Sadly, this is the way many people act in a spiritual sense. They assume that there is a place for them in God's kingdom. They assume that it will be a place of honor. They assume that this place is something they deserve. They have an inflated opinion of themselves. That was certainly true of the guests at the banquet to which Jesus had been invited in the Gospel lesson – he noticed all the guests scrambling for the places of honor.

Tell me, is that kind of behavior something that is restricted to first century Pharisees? Or could it be that you and I are guilty of that very same attitude? Could we be the ones who find ourselves thinking, "I deserve something better!"

Maybe it's in our relationship with others that we find ourselves thinking, "Me first." "Why should I talk to him?" Or, "I'm not going to waste my time with her. Those people are below me. I'm not going to be seen associating with them." Or, maybe it's at work that we say, "Hey how come he got new office furniture and I have to make do with this old stuff. I think I deserve more respect, more money, more benefits." Or, "why do I have to be the one who always has to clean up the kitchen or put away the laundry or discipline the children or bring home the bacon? I mean, for all the things I do around here, I'm the one who deserves the best spot on the couch. I get to run the remote!"

My friends, do you realize how easy, how natural it is to act just like those Pharisees as we jostle for the best spot? To say, "me first," to push our way into the limelight, to grab what we consider to be our just rewards. And of course, that temptation becomes only stronger when it seems that we have worked hard for a particular goal, or we have achieved a certain level of success, or we have accomplished something, be it socially, financially or athletically. When the world says, "You're the greatest," well then it's easy to start believing our own press. We start thinking "I deserve the honor. I deserve the applause."

And so often, that self-centered attitude spills over from our relationship to others to our relationship to God. We think, "God, I deserve what you have to offer. I've earned your good favor. I ought to get lots of good things from you in this life and the next."

At times, the Lord's disciples were like that too. Numerous times in the Gospel, we hear that the disciples were discussing who was the greatest among them. On one occasion Jesus, reminded them; (Matthew 20:25-28 NIV) **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. (26) Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, (27) and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- (28) just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

Our Savior's words remind us that there is no way that we are worthy of a place in God's kingdom. We have fallen short of God's expectations for us. Servants and slaves – that's not how we think of ourselves. We're subject to no one. Giving ourselves for others – you've got to take care of number 1 (meaning self) first. And, when it comes to being great – well let me tell you how great I am and how wonderful I am. That's the way our sinful ego thinks, talks and acts.

Our society has lost touch with what it means to humble oneself. Most people today have no idea of what it must have been like in Bible times when there were kings and subjects, masters and servants. We have no inkling of what it feels like to bow, kneel, or lay oneself flat on the ground in front of a king. We live in a country in which it is ingrained in our minds that all people are or should be considered equal. In the family, the school and the workplace an attitude of "partnership" is fostered. Employees are called associates. We do our best to ignore the fact that God has set certain people in places of greater responsibility than others. Our society stresses rights more than responsibilities. At times, it seems there is more emphasis on insisting on our rights than there is in making sure we have satisfactorily fulfilled our responsibilities.

Recognizing our natural inclination toward sinful, boastful pride, we ask how can I keep my ego from separating me from God? There are two keys to keeping our ego in check. The first step is to confess that sinful pride is just that; sinful! I need to admit that my "me-first" attitude is rebellion against God. It's saying "I'm Number One!" when God is Number One. That's idolatry. And for that we deserve God's God's just wrath . By

our "me first" attitude, we have earned only a place in hell. And yet, the more important key is the second and that is to believe that in spite of the fact that I've earned the worst spot, God in an act of pure undeserved love, has moved me into the best spot. More specifically, Jesus, by his life and death in our place has rescued us from the hell we deserved and granted us the eternal life we didn't deserve. As our verses from the Proverbs put it, in spite of our unworthiness he says to us, "Come up here."

Pride has plagued Christian people for ages. It was boastful pride that caused the Apostle Paul to write to the Philippians: (Philippians 2:3-11 NIV) **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, (4) not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (5) In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: (6) Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; (7) rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (8) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross! (9) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, (10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, (11) and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

When we realize that even the Son of God was not above lowering himself for the sake of others – our unworthiness suddenly comes more clearly into focus. Thus humbled before our God we approach him with a humble confession of our sins, declaring that we are unworthy of any of his blessings including a place in his kingdom.

But dear friends, rest assured there is a place for you in the Lord's kingdom. After humbly admitting your unworthiness of receiving that honor, you can humbly wait for him to exalt you.

We can turn once again to the Gospel lesson for today to understand what it means to humbly wait for the Lord to exult us. Jesus offers this advice to the host, "*When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.*" What? Is Jesus saying that it would be wrong for me to invite a few friends over for supper? No, what Jesus is saying is, "Before you throw a party for your friends and neighbors, you'd better ask yourself why are you doing it? Are you doing it for their benefit or yours? Are you doing it because of all the good things God has done for you, or are you doing it for all the good things you hope your friends and neighbors will do for you?"

Jesus says that if we're tempted to give in order to get, then we'd better concentrate on giving to the people who can't give anything in return. That's what Jesus means when he says, "*When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.*" In Jesus' day, there was no reward for inviting these kinds of people. There was no status in throwing a party for the poor. That would be regarded by the culturally elite as a waste of time and money.

And yet, isn't that exactly what Jesus has done for us? Our Savior prepared a heavenly banquet for the people who couldn't pay him back. Jesus didn't say, "Let's see, if I give up my throne in heaven, if I sacrifice my life on a cross, if I spill my blood for a world that hates me-what's in it for me? No, Jesus was not concerned about what in it for him. He's always and only concerned about what's in it for you! That's always been Jesus focus: You! The Bible says that Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. That is, to serve you. To give his life as a ransom for you.

That's why we can be so confident of our place in God's kingdom.

And because of what Jesus has done for us, because he has prepared a place in heaven for you, now we can look at the different choices in our lives and not ask, "What's in it for me?" Now, just like Jesus did, we can ask, "what's in it for them? What can I do to put other people first? What can I do to serve the needs of the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind?" Maybe it's delivering groceries. Maybe it's spending time in a nursing home. Maybe it's supporting those who minister to the convicts and the mentally disabled. If you think about it, God has given us all an endless number of opportunities to serve others, before we serve ourselves, once we realize it's not "me first."

Confident of our place in God's kingdom may we gladly seize these opportunities as we humbly wait for the Lord to exult us by taking us to live with him in glory. Amen.