

Luke 14:1, 7-11

In some restaurants the maitre d will give you a table up front if you tip him well. But if you come in without a tip in your hand and dressed, not to impress, but looking like an average commoner, you may find yourself sitting at a table back by the door into the kitchen. Where we sit in a Bob Evans may not matter a whole lot to us; but it does matter to the elite when they go out to a fancy restaurant. And it mattered to the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Whenever someone hosted a banquet, they made sure to seat themselves, not way in the back, but up front in a place of honor.

Jesus has words of rebuke for all who exalt themselves in this way. But His words are not just applicable when it comes to how we sit down around a table. His words are words of life. If they live within us, we will be seated around the table in heaven with all the saints triumphant. But if His words do not live within us, we will be humbled with all who perish. His words are that vital for our salvation.

"Whoever exalts himself," He says, *"will be humbled."* The point here is clear: no one can exalt himself; no one can honor himself. We can get away with it for a while, but in the end it leads to disaster.

To exalt oneself is to be our own judge and jury. We ourselves determine where we fit in with others; and, more importantly, where we fit in with God. To place myself up front with God is to say with the Pharisee in the temple: *"God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people..."* (Luke 18:11); *"My place is up here, not back there with that Publican, and with all the others who are not as successful as I am; who are not as charitable with their giving; who do not work as hard in the church as I do."*

After Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, interestingly enough, He said these same words immediately after: *"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled..."* This Pharisee was not sitting down to eat; he was praying in the house of God. To exalt ourselves may, or may not, show in our daily life. It's in the heart - that's where we exalt ourselves. We can hide our heart from others, but we cannot hide it from God. Anyone who thinks that they deserve a place up front with God will find themselves humbled, shamed; not only disgraced to a lower seat back by the kitchen, but thrown out with the kitchen trash.

"He who humbles himself will be exalted." Not only did Jesus say these words in our text; He said them also after the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Publican took the lowest seat when he prayed: *"Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner."* No exalting here; but true repentance. Not, *"I deserve something good; a seat of honor in Your kingdom!"* But, *"My seat is in the back by the kitchen; yes, I deserve to be thrown out with the garbage for I am but a worthless sinner."*

Where did this man fit in with others? He did not judge himself to be better. Where did he fit in with God? He did not belong with God. He assigned himself a seat in hell. *"He who humbles himself,"* says Jesus, *"will be exalted."* This Publican, and not the Pharisee, says Jesus, went home justified. To him, and not to the Pharisee, God said: *"Friend, move up higher."*

"He who humbles himself..." These words are not only spoken by Jesus; they speak of Jesus. He is the One who did this. Never did He exalt Himself. His whole life was one of humility. He was

born to a lowly virgin. His crib was a feeding trough in a stable. The Son of God humbled Himself by becoming man, to become a servant to men. He took the lowest seat of all; His seat was a lonely cross. He was assigned a place with the wicked. He was thrown outside the banquet hall of Jerusalem and died on a garbage dump called Golgotha. Of all men, Jesus is the only one who truly humbled Himself. He chose for Himself the seat of agony in hell - the seat we all deserve.

“He who humbles himself will be exalted.” God did not leave His Son in the lowest seat, but He moved Him up higher; to the highest seat of heaven, that *at the name of Jesus every knee will bow*. God raised Him from the dead on the Third Day. Now all glory and honor belongs to Jesus. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him. Jesus is exalted more than all. But to be thus exalted He first humbled Himself.

If you want to be exalted then you must follow Jesus in His humility. We cannot exalt ourselves. Only God can move us up higher - to a seat in heaven with Christ. It is not the way of Jesus to be proud; to think better of Himself than others. If we assign ourselves a seat of honor, then it's not Jesus we're following. If I think of myself as more deserving than others, then Jesus is not my Lord. The only seat you and I can take is the one the Publican took...*“Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” “I, a poor, miserable sinner...deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment.”*

To such a one who humbles himself, God says, *“Friend, move up higher.”* He places you next to His Son. He calls you His own child. Baptized into Christ, you die with Him and you are raised with Him. This is not the seat we deserve, for we are but sinners. But it is the seat God gives you through grace. He forgives your sins. Jesus has saved this seat next to Him for you; and no one can take it from you, for you are Jesus' guest at the banquet feast of heaven.

Our Communion hymn later is not one we commonly sing: *“O Gracious Lord; I Firmly Am Believing.”* It's message is powerful. I'm going to read verses 2 & 3, so closely tied to what we are hearing today.

Lord, I have sinned, a thousand times offending; my thankless thoughts and words and deeds erase; to me Your hand of mercy now extending, O God, my Savior, I implore Your grace.

You see my sin yet seat me at Your table; Lord, as a guest, I surely am the least: unclean, unfit, of worthy deeds unable -my heart prepare for this most holy feast.

It should be of great comfort to us that our Lord invites us up to His Communion Table to partake in His feast. We are but poor sinners who have no right to claim a place, a seat here with Him. And yet, here is your seat. Here is your place at the table. It is the place next to Jesus. Every seat here is a seat of honor, for the Honored One, Christ Himself, gives His own body and blood to all His invited guests. This feast is a foretaste of the feast to come. Your seat here at this table points to your seat at the table in heaven. The forgiveness you receive here is that which gives you a seat in heaven. Your place with Christ here assures you of a place with Christ in heaven.

Today you and I have come to God's house with all our sin, guilt, and shame. We seat ourselves in the lowest place. But in mercy, God says to you, *“Friend, move up higher.* You are forgiven. Your seat is here at My Sacrament today, and tomorrow will be at My table in heaven.” Amen.