

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 28, 2016

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In the 13th Chapter of Saint Luke there is reference to the wonderful heavenly banquet where the faithful get to sit down at the Lord's table. But in the 14th Chapter, which is today's gospel, there is a *very different* banquet. This one is a most unpleasant occasion!

The guests were drawn from the circle of a Pharisee's rich friends and relatives. They knew each other and were probably intense rivals. When they arrived at the banquet they began to jockey for position. Some were no doubt more discreet than others. You know the routine. To claim your place you tip up the chair or put a wine glass or a lady's purse at the coveted seat. Perhaps some were even more obnoxious about it. This spectacle of bad behavior was unfolding right in front of the Son of God, Who was the complete outsider and the only One Who didn't care where He sat.

So for this occasion the Lord provided some good practical advice. *On one level* this advice would benefit anyone, Christian or not. It is not spiritual advice that says: "Go to the lowest seat: you may be allowed to remain there, or you may be sent up higher. But in neither case will anyone think ill of you." No appeal is made to anyone's religious tenets. You could get this advice in *Emily Post* or *Martha Stewart*.

But *on another level* there was greater opportunity. These men jockeying for status at table were either Pharisees or of that circle. They were expected to live at a higher level of spiritual maturity than the norm. Spiritual maturity is always associated with *humility*. In this situation Jesus had something more in mind than giving advice about table manners!

Remember C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. The chief devil tells his student humility is *not* a pretty woman trying to believe she is ugly. It is *not* a clever man trying to believe he is a fool. But the advice of Screwtape to Wormwood is: keep the thinking on that level! Humility is actually quite a different thing, as the devil well knows. It is not modesty or good breeding, although humility may manifest itself in these ways.

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At a certain stage the Christian disciple simply abandons all criteria for stages of spiritual development, or any kind of standing, social or otherwise. He stops trying to evaluate his status or that of others. Where people rank in the overall scheme of things stops mattering to the mature Christian disciple. He learns to defer all of these judgments to the Only One Who has the full knowledge and authority to make them.

This is the pattern of Christian life. That pattern sooner or later wells up and is manifest in each of our individual lives. Study the implications of the hidden life of our Lord all those thirty years at Nazareth. Study the lives of the saints, or the rule and ideal of various religious orders. You will find a *love of obscurity*. I know it sounds strange to put it that way. It is a waiting upon God alone and letting the world go its own way without you. This love of obscurity is an integral part of sanctity. Obscurity is sometimes drowned out by the Christian's legitimate engagement with the world. It is drowned out also by the clash of strident voices. But the bottom line is that you and I simply must have a hidden life if we care to cultivate the familiar friendship Almighty God desires to have with us. He will not compete with the world for our attention.

At that dinner party only One Person was absolutely certain He was known to and cared for by His Heavenly Father. Whether other people knew about Him or cared about Him, or where He sat at table was of no consequence. In the final analysis, although we can get stewed up over many things, only one thing matters. Jesus said it doesn't matter if you gain the whole world if you are not accepted by your Father in Heaven. And it is on *His* terms, not yours or mine.

That is the way with all the saints, whether they are high profile or not. They are concerned with how their Father sees them in secret. That is the motivation for all they are and do. Where they sit at table, and a whole host of other things that might concern us every day are not even on the radar screen! And the reason for this strange behavior is they have been told, and come to know, a God "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven and took upon Himself the nature of a slave for our sakes." *That* is the real humility, and Screwtape knows it well! Real humility sets off the alarm bells on his control board!

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There is nothing like the Christian lifestyle in all the world. And you and I know it gets trampled on. But do not attempt to water it down or make it worldly acceptable. For it follows One Who, first in excellence, was willing to be last in precedence taking the place of a servant. You and I call *Him* Lord and Christ.