

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
September 1, 2019

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In the 13th Chapter of Saint Luke's Gospel there is reference to the heavenly banquet, where the blessed souls get to sit down at the Lord's table. But in the 14th Chapter, today's gospel, we have a very different dinner party, and this one is an unpleasant occasion.

The guests were all drawn from the circle of a Pharisee's wealthy friends and relatives. They knew each other and were likely intense rivals. When they arrived at the banquet these people began jockeying for position. Some were more discreet than others. You know the routine. They tip up the chairs or put a wine glass or a lady's purse by the coveted seat to indicate it is "taken". No doubt other guests were being more obnoxious. And Our Lord Jesus, as the outsider, was the only One Who didn't care where He sat.

Many years before my arrival, a Scotsman named Father MacGregor was a priest on the staff of my old parish in Dorchester. Invited to an elegant birthday party, when the guests were ushered into the dining room, Fr MacGregor went to the chair at the head of the table. The hostess then kindly told him that spot was for the birthday boy, and the place for the priest was two seats down the side of the table. To which the Scotsman was reported to have said, "It is no concern to me; where the MacGregor sits *is* the head of the table!"

What was happening in the Pharisee's house was unfolding right in front of the Son of God and it gave Him opportunity *on one level* to provide some good practical advice. There is nothing spiritual about saying "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." This advice would benefit anyone and is *not* an appeal made to summon up anyone's religious tenets.

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

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In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the chief devil says to his student that an example of humility is not a beautiful woman trying to believe she is ugly, or a clever man trying to believe he is a fool. But Screwtape tells Wormwood to keep the thinking about humility on that level. Humility is actually quite a different thing. At a point in his discipleship the Christian becomes unaware of all the stages of his own spiritual development and any criteria of social standing. He stops trying to evaluate his status or that of others. Where people rank in the overall scheme of things is no longer a concern at all. This Christian soul has learned to defer all these judgments to the Only One Who has the full knowledge and authority to make them.

Meditate on the hidden life of Our Lord for those thirty years at Nazareth. Study the lives of the saints or the rule of various religious orders. You will find what we might call a *love of obscurity*. It sounds strange to put it that way. But 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. It is sometimes crowded out by the Christian's legitimate engagement of the world, or the sharing of his gifts for the spread and extension of Christ's Kingdom. But the bottom line is that you and I simply must have this true humility 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.

However little the world knew or cared about Him, or where He sat at table at that Pharisee's dinner party, only One Person was absolutely certain He was known to and cared for by His Heavenly Father. In the final analysis, although you and I can get stewed up over many things, this is the only one that 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 always on *His* terms, and not ours.

In all the world there is nothing like the Christian lifestyle. You and I know it is likely to get 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. *And you and I call Him Lord and Saviour.*