



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Take Your Place Psalm 112; Luke 14:1, 7-14

There was a time when I enjoyed sitting at the head table at a banquet. The term itself says a lot—"head" table—which suggests that it holds some prominence. The head table at a banquet is usually generously sprinkled with people important to the event: the head of the organization hosting the event, the Master of Ceremonies (usually a witty and popular person), a few dignitaries, elected officials, the keynote speaker, and, often in my case, an available parson who will bless it all with an invocation in exchange for a free meal!

I learned over time, however, that there are some perils to sitting at the head table. As Luke informed us, when Jesus entered the banquet, all of the Pharisees were watching him closely. Dining at the head table is like having your dinner in the display window at Macy's! Everyone is watching you. They notice when you pick up the wrong fork to eat your salad. They clearly see when the cherry tomato rolls off the plate and onto the table and wonder what you are going to do. You drop your fork and everyone waits to see if you are going to ask for another one, pick that one up and blow it off, or finish the meal with your fingers! And when that delicious spinach souffle finds permanent lodging between two of your front teeth, everyone in the room will see it, even if you don't! Head table dining can be hazardous.

So I don't particularly enjoy being seated at the head table any more, although I do enjoy having a seat in the banquet hall. A few months ago, Deborah and I attended a dinner for one of our local charities. A number of you were there. I had purchased tickets and made sure our names were on the list. When we arrived, we checked in and were told our table number. Like everyone else, we visited with a variety of people around the room until we were all informed that it was time to be seated. We began to look for our table, but the numbers weren't in sequence. Finally, when we were about the last two people standing, we spotted a table in the back of the room indicating it was number 30, which was our table—and ours alone! No one else was sitting there. Feeling as if we were being quarantined, we looked around to see that everyone else was seated at other tables. Fortunately, a couple of kind Lakesiders had two empty chairs at their table and motioned for us to join

them. I learned that being in the very back of the room is no more fun than being at the very front!

Jesus had a sense of such things. He knew the pecking order at special events and understood that the seats closest to the host were prized by everyone but reserved for a special few. Apparently, in those days, they did not have those helpful place cards which told everyone where to sit, and some folks, eager to be nearer the action, took it upon themselves to sit in the places of honor. At this particular banquet, Jesus noticed the way guests jockeyed for position, as if they were playing musical chairs without the music. Knowing that all eyes were on him anyway, he decided to use the occasion as a teachable moment and advised the diners not to rush to the places of honor, assuming that is where they should sit. The embarrassment will be great, he said, if the host taps you on the shoulder and asks you to give up your seat to someone of greater prominence. Instead, he suggested, head for the back of the room. If the host invites you to sit next to him, great. Otherwise, enjoy the company around you and you will spare yourself great embarrassment.

Among other insights he shared with the people at this dinner, he urged them to be humble. Humility is far better than humiliation and is a much better position to occupy in life. Perhaps Jesus was familiar with the Talmudic teaching which warned, "Be humble that you may not be humbled." [Derek Eretz 1:27] Humility is knowing your particular place in life, neither assuming a greater position nor resigned to a lesser position. Humility is knowing who you are and being confident in who God created you to be.

Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul advised them,
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the
renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will
of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the
grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of
yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with
sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God
has assigned. Romans 12:2-3

First and foremost, humility is an honest look at ourselves. "Someone asked one of those ancient Fathers how he might obtain true humility, and he answered: 'By keeping your eyes off other people's faults, and fixing them on your own.'¹ Jesus had something similar to say when he reminded us to beware of pointing out the speck in someone else's eye when there is a plank in our own (Luke 6:41-42). Focusing on the faults and limitations of another

¹St. Alphonse Rodriguez, *The Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*, 1611, as cited in Ralph L. Woods, ed., *The World Treasury of Religious Quotations* (New York City: Garland Books, 1966), 455.

person in order to boost our own sense of self worth is a dangerous practice. We become like the Pharisee who bravely prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). The truth is, we are all alike for we are all sinners (Romans 3:23). It is best for us to deal with our own shortcomings and let other people deal with theirs.

Humility, however, is not a matter of recognizing how horrible we are. Quite the contrary, being humble is about recognizing the ways in which God has gifted us without letting it go to our heads. We have to beware that we do not let our humility become a source of pride. A fifteenth century Persian mystic named Jami offers a humorous and unforgettable way to guard against pride. He said,

Never preen yourself
that you are prideless:
for pride is more invisible
than an ant's footprint
on a black stone
in the dark of night.²

I like the way that Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner describes humility:

Humility is often confused with saying you're not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

If you really aren't much of a bridge player, you're apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy.

True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.³

True humility, I think, is knowing yourself well enough to be comfortable sitting in the back of the dining hall and being extremely grateful if asked to

²Jami, *The Abode of Spring*, as cited in Peter Lorie and Manuela Dunn Mascetti, *The Quotable Spirit: A Treasury of Religious and Spiritual Quotations, from Ancient Times to the 20th Century*, (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 267.

³Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973).

move up front. In addition, it is wondering why everyone else in the room is not sitting at the head table as well.

Although for years I could not watch beyond the witch landing on top of the little house and hurling fireballs at the Scarecrow, *The Wizard of Oz* is one of my favorite movies. One of the best scenes in the movie is when the Wizard finally grants the group of pilgrims their wishes to have what they think they lack for fulfillment and happiness. As he points out, each one already possesses what they want—a brain, a heart, courage, and the way home. They only need some way to recognize those gifts in order to take advantage of them.

In the same way, God has gifted each of us in multiple ways. Our task in life is to discover those gifts, exercise them, and put them to good use. Take your place, Jesus says. Discover who you are and occupy your rightful place in the world.

I love music and every part of me (except, perhaps, my vocal chords) wants to make music. I can make a joyful noise and enjoy doing so. While I am not a musician or singer, I can support those who are and rejoice in the gifts God has given them. I do know that I have been given pastoral skills to help people through good and bad times. I am creative and a fairly good problem solver. On most Sundays, I am a decent preacher. I know how God has gifted me and how he has not. I can humbly and joyfully accept that fact and do my best to use my gifts as God gives me opportunity. Humility involves understanding ourselves with all of our abilities and limitations and being confident in who we are. That is why the psalmist celebrates the fact that the righteous stand firm in their hearts. They are confident in who they are (Psalm 112).

While humility begins with us, it also extends to other people. Accepting my limitations and abilities also involves recognizing the abilities and limitations of other people. We need to rejoice in the gifts God gives to the people around us and encourage them to use those gifts.

In a recent newsletter celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Campbell University Divinity School, Joy Heaton, who, at one time was the pastor of Antioch Baptist Church outside of Enfield, told about a pivotal time in her life when she was facing a critical decision. She called the Divinity School office on New Years Eve 2006 and asked if there was anyone there who could talk with her that day. Dr. Bruce Powers agreed to see her and they talked for some time about her future. As Joy was leaving the office, Professor Donald Keyser walked by and Dr. Powers stopped him and said,

"Dr. Keyser, I would like to introduce you to Joy Heaton. God is calling her to be a pastor!"⁴

When we take our place in God's world, we can better help other people find theirs as well. Sometimes we will recognize a similar gift in someone else and ask them to join us in some form of ministry like singing or teaching or arranging flowers. We may notice that someone is especially friendly and compassionate and suggest that they visit people who are struggling in life. Those of you who are handy at making repairs can help with odd jobs around the church or, more important, in the homes of people who can no longer do such work. Ushers offer hospitality to everyone who comes to worship. Our social committee enables us to fellowship together. Program committees need creative and helpful people to guide our ministries and administrative committees need thoughtful and committed people to oversee our common ministry. There is something for everyone in this congregation to do—and we should be doing it. There is something for you to be doing in life—and you should be doing it. So what are your gifts? How can you use them? What gifts do you see in the people around you? How can you encourage them to use those gifts?

Jesus continues his parable by reminding the guests at the dinner party that no one should be left out of the celebration. In God's banquet hall there is a seat for everyone—those who occupy some prominence in the community and those who do not. At God's table, all seats are seats of honor. Therefore, there is no need for pride other than the pride of being included as a child of God.

Years later, the Apostle Paul would sing with joy about his Savior:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5-11

Take your place, Jesus urges us, wherever it is, and help the people around you find theirs. Then, let us feast on the good life God has desired for us all. Amen.

⁴*Campbell Divinity School Newsletter*, Summer 2016, p. 2.

August 28, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We find comfort here in this sacred place, O God. We are among friends and the temperature is soothing while just beyond these walls the baking heat threatens to drain life from the earth. Plants wilt, animals seek shelter, and the air is thick and stifling. In here, we find comfort, not only for our bodies but for our spirits as well.

We know the news of the week all too well: floods and fires, tropical storms and earthquakes, street violence and terrorism, illness, disease, and accidents. Like oppressive heat and drought, so much in the world threatens life and brings grief and fear. When we pause and breathe deeply, however, we sense the soothing breath of your spirit upon our fevered brow. We feel the cool, reassuring touch of your grace and we know that we are not alone. Often in little ways, your love revives and refreshes us, O God, and we are grateful.

We pray for people all over the world who shudder with grief and shake with fear today. Help them to survive their trauma and guide them as they rebuild their lives. We pray for health and healing for people who are ill and ask that you guide them in ways that are both wise and beneficial. Give them help and hope, we pray. Keep us always alert to your generosity which brings what we need often before we seek it. And bolster our faith, O God, so that we do not despair but seek out life wherever it might be found.

We are grateful for new life that comes into our midst. In the presence of a newborn baby, when good news arrives to chase away doubts, in triumphs large and small, when young men and women begin walking their own path, in the quiet of the night when everything nonessential falls away, you remind us that life is a gift which you give moment by moment. Thank you, God, for never forgetting us.

We ask your blessing on schoolchildren and teachers, on college students and administrators, on parents and friends, on communities and campuses as life changes in these days. Keep the growing pains minimal, we pray, and help us to flourish through the stress of things good and bad.

Teach us the little ways of love that we might better care for one another. Guide us along the right paths so that we become a stronger community of care. Wrap us in the arms of your compassion so that we know we are never alone; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.