

Have you ever sat in the wrong seats at a ticketed event, like a sporting event or a play? That can be embarrassing, especially when you think, “Wow, we really got good seats,” and then an usher appears, asking to check your ticket, and then you have to move to seats that are less than ideal. That can be really awkward. A lot of times, those mistakes are unintentional, but they are still embarrassing nonetheless.

What would be worse would be going to a dinner or banquet and, even though you are not the guest of honor, or a member of the wedding party, you decide to sit at the head table. Then the host would have to come over and ask you to move. Everyone would feel uncomfortable. Someone who knows you well enough might ask you, “What were you thinking?”

Jesus describes a similar scenario in today’s Gospel lesson, and he offers what, at first, just seems like good social advice—proper etiquette, if you will. When you show up at a wedding banquet, Jesus says, take a lesser seat, and let the host decide where you belong. Makes sense. You’ll certainly avoid the embarrassing scene of being asked to move. And you just might enjoy the honor of having the host say, “Move up to a better place.”

What I would suggest to you today is that this story is more than just a lesson in manners. If we look closely, we will see Jesus highlighting a fundamental attitude he wants us to have. That attitude is humility.

Humility is a peculiar virtue and is easily misunderstood. The author and performer Garrison Keillor has gotten a lot of mileage out of describing the extreme humility of the people of the Upper Midwest., where folks are brought up to be deeply mistrustful of any compliments, to the point that they don’t believe they have any good qualities at all! But humility is not self-hatred. At the other end of the spectrum are those who are well acquainted with the language of humility, but don’t believe a word of it. When they say, “It was nothing,” they really mean, “I was awesome, wasn’t I?” It turns out, false humility is just pride in disguise.

Now we have named the real enemy: pride. “Where should I sit at the banquet” is really a question of pride. How important do I think I am, really? What do I think I deserve? These are important questions to consider, not just when it comes to choosing a table at the next wedding you go to, but in all of life, including how you relate to God Himself.

Here’s what I mean: we are tempted to seat ourselves at God’s best table based on us; on what we do. We perceive that our kindness toward others, or our link to a church, or our belief that we are really being obedient to God means that we deserve a plum position of some sort. These attempts at self-glorifying seem appropriate, because we are constantly told that hard work will get you moving up the ladder. You deserve good things because you’re a good person. Ok, you’re not always good, but you’re not as bad as the people sitting next to you. Pride plants the idea in my heart that God owes me something. Pride says that what matters most is what I want. But Jesus is saying that if you bring a prideful attitude into His kingdom, the least that’s going to happen is that you’ll end up embarrassed. The reality is that pride is a far more serious threat to faith. Not surprising, then, that pride is exposed in Holy Scripture.

Listen to these passages that leave no room for pride in the Christian heart: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3: 23). “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse (Galatians 3: 10). “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (Isaiah 64: 6). We cannot barge into God’s banquet and demand a seat based on our best performance. God will not allow it. So where does that leave us? Embarrassed and awkward? Maybe. Recognizing our sin can make us feel that way. But when you confess those sins and own up to them, you are voluntarily taking the lesser seat. When you finally see how helpless sin makes you, you are beginning to understand real humility. And when you come in humility to the feast of God, you will let the host seat you wherever he wants to. That is the great news for you today: barging into his banquet won’t work; but when you come confessing your sin, when you come to the party in humility, the host will be happy not just to welcome you; but to come out and get you and bring you to where you belong.

My son and I once had the experience of waiting in a long line for a store to open. We got in that line about an hour before the store was to open, and even so there were quite a few people in front of us. There was no way that we could’ve forced our way in. But with about forty minutes to go, a friend of ours who worked in that store came out, saw us waiting, and said, “Come with me.” We waltzed past those who had been ahead of us in line and right through the front entrance. It was a pretty good feeling. It really is about who you know.

That’s how it works in the kingdom of Jesus Christ. We can’t muscle our way in—the truth is we don’t deserve to be there at all. Jesus was made like us in every way so that he could step in for us, be punished on a cross for us, suffer hell instead of us. Jesus became one of us to defeat the devil and to break the power of death by rising to life on Easter. When we approach God’s feast in humility, the crucified and risen Savior actually comes out to get us to bring us in to where he is. He comes out with forgiveness and life, saying, “Friend, move up higher!” Move up higher—be washed in the baptismal water and joined to Jesus. Move up higher—receive forgiveness of your sins and be reconciled to others. Move up higher—hear the Word of God and let the Holy Spirit create a new heart within. Move up higher—eat and drink at the feast of the Lord, where Jesus’ body and blood are offered for pardon and peace. Let’s never forget that all of us are here in the kingdom of God, feasting at His table, for one reason alone: we have a gracious Host. We have a host who comes out to the humble and brings them in.