

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is at another meal, another party. That seems to be a huge part of his ministry—going to parties.

But these 1st century dinner parties are very different from our American 21st century parties.

First of all, more people were invited in Jesus' day. We tend to invite friends, family, and co-workers to our parties. But in Jesus' culture the dinner parties were enormous. It was important for the host to show how generous he was, and so he'd invite huge numbers of people, and in a small village, maybe most everyone in town.

BUT, once they got there, there would be different levels of the dinner party. The most important guests would sit at the head table and be given the best food. The mid-level guests would be a bit further out and the food they were served wasn't as fancy. And the poorest guests would be on the fringes, maybe seated on the floor, and they would be served much plainer food.

This is odd to us. We have music and sporting events where there are expensive seats and cheap seats, and this seems natural to us. You pay more, you get better seats with a better view.

But we'd never throw a private dinner party and then divide things up so to have different levels of food service based upon a person's socio-economic standing. T-bones for my most important guests, chuck steak for my middle guests, hamburger for my lowest guests. That seems weird to us. But that's the way Jesus' culture operated.

So in today's Gospel, Jesus is at a dinner party and notices people competing with each other for the better seats. In such a stratified culture, this was normal.

But Jesus tells them, "When you go to a dinner party, don't try to grab the best seat. Because if someone more important than you may come along, and then you might get bumped, your host might tell you to move down, and you'll be disgraced, it'll be embarrassing. But take the bottom seat, the seat closest to the door, and then if your host says, 'Friend, move up higher, you'll be honored in front of everyone.'"

Now this seems to be good practical advice from Jesus about how to act at dinner parties. But if that's all Jesus is talking about, about table manners, then this story probably belongs more in an etiquette book by Emily Post rather than in the Gospel According to Luke.

And there's a temptation to completely misread this parable, and turn it into a parody of itself.

Jesus says, don't compete for the best seats? Maybe that means everyone should fight and compete for the lowest seat at the party. That way the host will honor us by telling us to move up higher. That's a real slick way of getting recognition. Instead of bragging about myself, instead of blowing my own horn, I can let someone else do it for me. I can fish for

compliments. I can manipulate others so that they will praise me. Acting humble will bring me self-exaltation. Pretending to be modest will allow me to be showered with compliments. I can get more strokes for my ego by pretending to be humble instead of being conceited.

But I'm pretty sure that's not what Jesus was trying to say. As the saying goes, "False humility is the worst form of conceit." I think Jesus would agree. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

When Jesus says to take the lowest seat, he isn't talking about some manipulative method to get more praise by acting humble, by showing off your humility. Jesus is talking about true humility. Jesus is talking about really being humble, not to play at being humble in order to achieve something else.

And there's no one in the history of the universe who knew more about true humility than Jesus. There's an ancient Christian hymn that speaks of Jesus' humility. Paul even quotes it in the 2nd chapter of Philippians. It was not our Epistle lesson today. But I'm going to quote it anyway. Paul says,

"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."

It's an amazing statement. Jesus was God, and yet to carry out God's purpose in the world, Jesus Christ humbled himself, and emptied himself to the point of becoming human. And he went even further dying a shameful death in order to love and serve us. His life and his death were all about serving others.

Yes, Jesus went to a lot of parties. That was a huge part of his ministry. But he only hosted a couple of parties we're aware of.

They both happen to be pictured on this wall.¹

The first was an impromptu picnic. The 2nd window from the front shows the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus throws a huge party. And yet at his party, there are no divisions of guests. Jesus offers 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. All share in the food Jesus provided. And all are able to eat and be satisfied.

But then there is that other meal. Jesus acting as host at the Last Supper. Not at his home, but in a borrowed room. Imagine that. God incarnate wants to host a party, and he has to borrow the room to do it in.

¹ North wall—Feeding of 5,000 window and Last Supper window

And remember what he does before that supper starts. He takes off his outer garment, the host's garment. And he goes around the room washing the feet of his disciples. The host, God in their midst, acts as the lowliest servant. And then they eat. And again, there are no divisions. All partake equally of the meal he provides.

The Lord of all acts as servant of all. The one who could demand that we serve him, serves us. And he calls us to follow his example.

And not just on Sundays, and not just in Church. But in the rest of our lives as well.

We are called to be servants of all.

That's a tough thing. We live in a pretty stratified world. Sure, we're all equal before the law, at least in theory. And we come to church and know that we're all equal in God's eyes as well.

And yet we function in a world with hierarchies and chains of command and career ladders. Doesn't matter if we're talking about schools and universities, law firms or factories, hospitals or retailers, or for that matter those of us who get paid by the church. We all have our little pecking orders and layers of differing status.

And we often find ourselves jockeying for position, trying to increase our little share of the pie, trying to gain status and honor. That happens in the world. That happens in the church. Case in point is the procession during the service.

In a parade, the most important person usually leads the parade. The grand marshal is up in the front of a parade.

But in a church procession, the clergy come in last. This was an intentional choice centuries ago. The back of the parade was the least important place. So the clergy chose to march at the back of the parade, the end of the procession, the least important position. And the cross was put in the front as a reminder to all of who is most important.

But clergy are human beings too. And it often happens that clergy start getting fouled up in their thinking. If you're in a large group of clergy, people sometimes even jockey for places in the back of the line. The back of the line paradoxically becomes the more high-status important position for clergy.

I don't know about your workplaces, but I suspect there are similar dynamics, similar games that get played.

In life, we want to succeed, and there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But the deeper question Jesus is asking is about our motivations. What are we after? Are we just trying to stroke our own egos? Are we just trying to make our lives more comfortable? Are we doing it for power or status?

Those are tough questions.

And yet our servant lord, our SERVANT-LORD calls us to follow his example. To lead by serving. To make others our priorities. To use the gifts and talents we've been given to make things better for everyone, not just for ourselves.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

"Christ Jesus was in the form of God, but did not cling to equality with God."

He humbled himself.

He comes as one who serves.

He calls us to follow his example.