

Robin Dodge  
Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
31 August 2025

Proper 17 – Year C  
Proverbs 25:6-7  
Psalm 112  
Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16  
Luke 14.1, 7-14

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

A few summers ago, on my way up to Maine to join my family who had already arrived there, I stopped for a couple of days in Boston. My purpose was to make a retreat at the Cambridge monastery of the Cowley Fathers, just a short walk from Harvard Square along the banks of the Charles River. The Cowley Fathers, more formally known as the Society of St. John the Evangelist, is the oldest Anglican religious order for men in the United States. This community of monks, living under traditional monastic vows and observing the daily services of morning, noonday, and evening prayer, as well as the Holy Eucharist, have been in Cambridge since 1870.

My first meal at the monastery was dinner. After evening prayer, as the other guests and I gathered in silence in the austere refectory, the superior of the monastery informed us that the dinner would be a “talking meal.” Normally, most meals are taken in silence, with some classical music playing in the background, or one of the monks reading from some spiritual tome. For the “talking meal,” however, the superior invited us guests to intersperse ourselves around the long, narrow tables with short benches in order to enjoy conversation with the brothers of the monastery.

Because I was one of the last guests to enter the refectory, I happened to be one of the first through the buffet line and began looking for a seat. I saw a wonderful table at the far end of the room that had a good view of the other tables. As I approached the table, I noticed on the side against the wall the table had not a

bench, but three high-backed chairs, the center one being a little higher and more imposing because of intricate hand-carvings than the other two chairs. I suddenly realized that that was where the superior of the monastery sat, and I quickly veered away.

I heard a calm voice calling behind me and turned around to see Brother Curtis, the superior of the monastery at the time. He graciously invited me to join him at the head table and sit beside him. I sighed inwardly with great relief, realizing how closely I had come to committing a terrible faux pas by sitting at the head table without an invitation. And then I remembered the Gospel we heard this morning: “[D]o not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.” The superior’s words to me were indeed, “Friend, move up higher,” and I did feel honored in the presence of all with whom I shared dinner that evening. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Of course, Jesus, in today’s Gospel lesson, is not giving advice on how to attend a dinner party. Jesus himself is a guest at a dinner party hosted by a leader of the temple and, as the Gospel tells us, all “were watching him closely.” Ironically, Jesus is watching all of them closely, and when he notices how all the guests choose the places of honor, he tells them a parable – a story that points to a larger truth. The meal that Jesus mentions in the parable isn’t a dinner party, but a wedding banquet, symbolic of the messianic banquet or heavenly feast to which we are all

invited on the last day when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. On that day, some who have had seats of honor will be asked by Jesus to move aside so that someone, less distinguished in the eyes of our secular culture, may go up higher and be honored in the presence of the heavenly host.

What the parable is talking about, of course, is humility – the act or condition or state of mind of being humble. Humility is a bit of a paradox. St. Augustine of Hippo found it surprising that “there is something in humility to exalt the mind, and something in exaltation to abase it.” What is odd on its face is the Christian teaching that the reward for being humble is to be exalted.

Though pride is a sin, humility – its opposite – is not so much a virtue as it is a grace from God. As a matter of grace, humility has nothing to do with a feigned low opinion of oneself. Even when the low opinion may be justified, humility doesn’t require self-loathing. In humility, there is objective humbleness: the unimportance which, paradoxically, is important to God. In humility there can be a sense of reverence toward God acknowledging glory not one’s own. And there is the kind of humility, not foreign to God, that pours itself out for other people’s sake, which is the opposite of pride expressed in self-centeredness. The humble in this sense can be exalted without losing their characteristic grace. They can exalt one another and find themselves heirs of God’s kingdom.

Contrary to popular secular opinion, Jesus doesn’t play favorites by sitting up on high arbitrarily deciding who will go to heaven and who won’t. Yes, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, but we each have a history, a resume if you will, of how we have lived our lives. Jesus knows us and will judge accordingly.

Thankfully for us, the Bible, the inspired word of God, tells us what Jesus is looking for in us. Today’s Scripture lessons provide us a prescription of how to lead

a life pleasing to Jesus Christ our Lord and Judge following the commandments of God.

Not only does Jesus give us advice on how to be a good guest at a dinner party, but he also tells us how to be a good host. Jesus says, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

This isn’t a command to refuse hospitality to friends, family, and those who may be well off; Jesus enjoyed their company too. But it’s a reminder that we are all called to do good to both the loveable and the not so loveable. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, some who have shown hospitality to strangers have entertained angels without knowing it. To do what is right in God’s eyes at all times is virtuous, but even more so when our charitable acts cannot possibly be attributed to our desire for personal material gain. Jesus appeals not to our secular sense of material gain, but rather to our spiritual sense of justice and righteousness.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also has advice for us about our wealth. He tells us, “Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for [Jesus] has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’” Note that it’s the love of money, not money itself, that causes us to stumble. When we put our love of money ahead of our love for God, we stumble and the sins of pride and arrogance befall us. But money, when used rightly and justly, assures us that we are following in the commandments of God. After all, it’s money that allows us to host the banquets for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and to do good in

general. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.”

Most importantly, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.” We are called to worship God gloriously in this place and offer God the fruit of lips that confess his name, that is, prayer. K.E. Kirk, in his book The Vision of God, wrote: “Worship alone can make us humble.” I would suggest that prayer, as an integral part of worship, also makes us humble because it forces us to acknowledge our reliance on God alone. Remember this the next time you hear a calm voice calling behind you, “Friend, move up higher.” It may not be the voice of the superior of a monastery. It may be the voice of the Lord. Amen.