

Social Awareness, Godly Awareness

Luke 14:1-14 (ESV)

The Word of God for today is from our Gospel text, especially this verse: **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN.

Dear saints of St. John’s,

Imagine this: you’re attending a wedding of a fairly good friend. Maybe not good enough to be in the wedding party, but good enough to be invited to the rehearsal dinner beforehand. You enter the reception venue and an important decision comes to your mind: where do you sit? There doesn’t seem to be any “reserved” tags on the tables. Do you sit close to the wedding party? Maybe those seats are really for the family. Should you risk it? Can you imagine the embarrassment of being asked to change seats? You look like a fool, having chosen a seat more honorable than your guest status. The couple is made to look like a hired bouncer moving people from table to table. And the rightful seat holders feel bad such a big deal was made.

So, I can totally understand why our Lord uses this situation as a teaching moment. “Hey, guys. Save yourself the embarrassment of choosing the wrong seat, and always take the lower one for yourself.” Yet, Jesus is not only concerned about your social awareness. He uses this opportunity, the Pharisee meal he was invited to, to help teach us the godly application of a humble mindset. If this is the case for our simple worldly situations (that we should take care in choosing our seats at feasts in order to not be embarrassed), how much more can this be applied to our relationship with God. Indeed, our whole Christian life needs this reminder: the exalted will be humbled, and the humbled exalted.

Why is this the case? Well, it is a consequence of man’s fall into sin. As God originally created us, man was to act as a humble servant of the Almighty Creator, delighting in the life lived in paradise. Yet, from the temptation of the devil and his acceptance of sin, this sin detests thinking of himself as a lowly servant and helper. This sin thinks of himself as great and deserving of all praise and affection; he is entitled. He thinks he should be ruler and creator over all, determining what is good and what is bad. While you still live in this body of sin, while you live on this side of death, this self-exalting sin wants to have the upperhand. So, Jesus warns all his followers to watch out for any self-exaltation, and instead to humble oneself.

Exaltation and humiliation; a quick word on how this is used by our Lord Jesus. We are dealing here with what man thinks of himself. What mindset he has will affect how he acts. The man who thinks he is really important will choose that “reserved” seat

at the reception. The man who thinks he is worthy enough to be invited, but maybe not important enough will sit near the doors. Either assumption might be correct. But it is not up to the invited one to make that decision, it is the decision of the host. This is the important tie in with our lives before God. It is not our decision on how we should be favored by God. It doesn't matter what I think, it matters what God thinks. Just as it is safer to take the lower seat at the reception, so it is safer to think of myself lower and let God tell me to "move on up."

Wherever God is, he brings down those who exalt themselves and uplifts those who have been humbled. Indeed, when we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, there are many examples of humiliation and exaltation. Those who expect something from Jesus, something which they think they have deserved for themselves, will be rejected and corrected. Yet, those who come to Jesus in faith, knowing they have nothing from themselves, will receive the gifts Jesus comes to bring.

When Jesus returns to his hometown after he has been baptized and started preaching in the synagogues, he received a cool welcome from his family members. While at first, they welcome his teaching, even being amazed by his words of grace, they quickly sour because he won't grant them any special favors or healings. They think because they are his own flesh and blood that they are entitled to direct access of this miracle worker. Jesus sees that they are not receiving him with the right heart. They don't care so much about his message of repentance and forgiveness, but instead care for worldly matters. Jesus gives examples to his relatives of God showing mercy on the unexpected to rebuke them. His relatives thought God could have partiality. God will help those who ask of him and see their own need, not those who think it is something owed to them. Thus, the exalted ones have become humbled.

On the other hand, Jesus meets Peter when he is desperate for a good catch of fish. All Peter's labor was in vain; no amount of working through the night could bring in the needed catch for his livelihood. When Jesus asks Peter to try again with his own blessing, Peter does not contest him. He could have said, "Hey Jesus, I think I know how to fish thank you very much. I doubt trying again would help any." But he doesn't. He takes Jesus at his word. Peter doesn't just think of himself less by accepting Jesus' (seemingly) redundant request, but Peter also openly admits his lowliness. When Peter and his fishermen indeed catch a tremendous number of fish through the blessing of Jesus, Peter says, "Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Peter recognizes his unworthiness and does not let himself be the judge. Peter lets Jesus be the judge. Our Lord responds with, "Do not be afraid." He says, "Yes, you are a sinner. It is good that you thought little of yourself. But I don't. You are my beloved and I have a great task for you. You will be a fisher of men and will accomplish my ministry to the glory of my Father's name." Peter who brought himself low because of Jesus' great miracle is lifted up to a place of honor, to be a proclaimer of Jesus' love. The humble are exalted.

Every Divine service begins with this choice between being like Jesus' relatives or like St Peter. Do you expect something of God or do you come to him empty handed?

Indeed, you come empty handed. You say, “I a poor, miserable sinner confess unto you all my iniquities with which I have ever offended you.” You speak very plainly. You have nothing to give God. You have nothing you deserve from God. You are as Peter: “I am a sinful man!” You let God be your judge. You let God have the final say. “I forgive you all your sins.” God says, “Do not be afraid.” He says, “I love you; you are mine. Come, rest in my love, listen to my Word.” With this entrance, you let the host tell you where to sit. While you confess you are not even worthy to enter God's house, he demands you to stay and dwell here in his presence forever. The humble are exalted. Yet, humbling yourself is not only what you expect of God but also how you receive God and his Word.

Within Jesus' ministry there is humiliation and exaltation with those who receive his teaching. For example, one group who refuses to be humbled by the Word of God is the Sadducees. They are the priests of the Israelite religious system. They take care of the temple, the sacrificial system. These are important folks. Yet, they do not care for everything God says. They do not believe that there is a resurrection of the dead. They do not believe angels or demons exist. They live as if life is only for this world. They especially do not care that Jesus teaches against their beliefs. In fact, they want to trip Jesus up. They come to him with a tricky speculative question: “If there really is the resurrection of the dead, what will happen to those who have had multiple spouses, who will they be married to in heaven?” They don't really care about the answer. They think they have a “gotcha” to Jesus' silly belief in the resurrection. Jesus does not leave them as exalted. He humbles them with a simple answer. “You fools think your ideas are better than God's? Of course there is a resurrection of the dead. When God appeared to Moses he said, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.’ God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living. If he is Isaac's God, and Isaac is dead, how does that work? It doesn't. Indeed, Isaac is still alive and will live forever more in heaven.” Then Jesus is even more direct. He tells them that they do not know the Word of God nor its power. They are shamed in front of the crowds. The exalted are humbled.

Others though, when they hear Jesus' teaching, receive it with sincerity, believing Jesus and seeking to amend their life. One example is Zacchaeus. He was a rich tax collector – one who legally stole from people to make himself better off. He certainly thought much of himself if he thought, “I deserve it. I'm worthy of other people's money.” Yet, when he was confronted with Jesus Christ, when he heard “do unto others as you would like them to do to you,” he received our Lord's word. Zacchaeus recognized that Jesus was telling the truth, that Zacchaeus' dishonest work was deplorable. Zacchaeus could have come up with many excuses for his work, but he lays those aside. He lets Jesus' word define himself. Our Lord sees that Zacchaeus has become humbled and invites himself over for dinner. Zacchaeus shows how his mindset has changed by promising to give back everything he took and to give back even more than he took away! Jesus responds by saying, “Today salvation has come to this house...” He commends Zacchaeus' actions and confirms that Zacchaeus has been exalted.

Will you accept our Lord's Word and let it apply to your life or will you reject it? Thankfully there are many opportunities to hear God's Word and accept it within our

regular St. John's gatherings. As part of the regular Divine Service, or prayer service such as Matins or Evening Prayer, when you hear God's Word you either say "Amen" or "Thanks be to God." You understand whose Word you have just heard and you know it to be true. Don't let it be just unconscious words, but let them be heartfelt words. "Yes, Lord. You have said this and I must hear it well. Thank you for not only the grace to hear them, but giving me the Spirit to understand them. Let them be true for me, even as they are true in themselves."

You know you shouldn't expect anything from God, but come and confess yourself as a sinner in need of mercy. You know you should take God at his Word and receive it with joy. This also you should receive humbly: his most holy work on the cross, the death of our Lord Jesus. Even there we see humiliation and exaltation with those who either receive this work for their benefit or reject it for its lowliness. We see it in the crowds and we see it with the thief on the cross. The rulers of the people and the soldiers who were crucifying Jesus were mocking him. They said, "If he is the Christ, the Son of God, then let him save himself!" They did not realize that this unrighteous death of the innocent one for the sake of all. They did not realize that the Father was forsaking his Son so that all the forsaken sinful men could become the beloved sons of God. Instead, these mockers thought to themselves, "Aha! We are truly the followers of God. Look at ourselves. We got what we wanted. This trouble is out of our hands now. We can go back to ruling the people with no troubles and keeping the law of God until the true Christ should come." While they were not humbled immediately, they had their 15 minutes of fame on Good Friday, these men were humbled by the resurrection of Jesus. Their mockery of God's Son was shown to be worthless when Jesus defeated death, hell, and the power of the devil by blasting open the door of the tomb, ushering in the grace of God for all who believe. Yes indeed, the exalted were humbled on that Easter morning.

Yet the humbled were also exalted that Easter day. For those who received the death of Jesus on their behalf were given the power of the resurrection – the power to live before God forever in resurrected bodies. That is exactly what occurred to the thief being crucified next to our Lord. This thief could not stand all those mocking Jesus. He knew that Jesus did not deserve to be up there. He knew he was not worthy to even be crucified next to the Holy One of God. That was mockery enough – that Jesus should stand next to such sinners. Yet this man knew Jesus was merciful. The thief knew there was no despair for himself. There is God himself dying for my sake! "Lord, remember me when you enter into your kingdom!" This is the cry of the humble. "Remember me, Lord! For I have nothing worthy of myself to enter your reign. I deserved this evil death. I deserve the guilt and shame. I am worthy. But you have shared your worth with me! Remember me Lord!" Is it that surprising for us how Jesus responded? Hopefully it isn't. Jesus sees how this man has been humbled, how the thief has recognized his need and sought it from the only one who could help him, Christ the Son of God. This thief had let God be the one to judge his worthiness. And Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Every Divine service you see the great mystery of the cross working for your salvation. You remember the Lord's death until he comes again by coming to receive a blessing from the Lord's table - the true body and blood of the eternal God. You see the greatness and power of God working in weakness, working through a self-sacrificial death. You come to that rail with the same words as that thief once said, "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom!" You let Jesus be the judge of your worth. You let his words from the cross exalt your status: "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Yes, you who come to this altar are exalted, far above the heavens to dwell with God as you receive God who comes down to be in the bread and the wine. Indeed, the humble are exalted.

Jesus' relatives and Peter, Sadducees and Zacchaeus, the mockers and the thief; many more examples can be given from the life and ministry of Jesus concerning his statement: **everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.** The humble (Peter, Zacchaeus, the thief) all let God be the judge, the definer of their worth. They let Jesus' words be enough. But, this was not limited to when Jesus worked then. It is true even here at St. John's. When you confess your sins, you let God move you up. When you gladly hear God's Word, you let God move you up. When you receive the body and blood of Your Lord, you let God move you up. Indeed, the exalted are humbled and the humbled are exalted. AMEN.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.