

Luke 14:7-11

*There is a Difference*

(Singing) “I am special I am special, look at me, look at me...” Now you know why I didn’t try out for the choir. This is the kind of song that we think kids sing in Kindergarten. Them walking down an elementary school; consider those noises and cords reverberating throughout the hallway. Not what we would think in terms about dinner guests who are invited to a dinner, but in many ways this kind of parable reveals that attitude of someone who, rather presumptively, would sit at the head of the table. For in Jesus’ day where you sat, really where you lay, for they lay in reclining couches around a table and the closer you were to the guest, the host, the closer you were to the head of the table, the more important person you were. So to have a sense of self importance, to have a sense that you are special enough to sit at the head table and come and be at the front, Jesus says don’t. Don’t think of yourself as a VIP. Don’t think of yourself as a very important person rather when you come in take the lowest seat. And his message runs totally counter to the culture of his day for in that Greco-Roman world there was this sense of gravitas, of honor, of dignity that was strived for in a very competitive atmosphere. And so you wanted to sit at the head of the table, in fact you thought often that you should. Maybe you were jealous if you were not able to. And how today, how so today, does it not also run counter to our culture. A culture in which we strive to get ahead, which we strive to distinguish ourselves and at times accumulate, a culture in which we find everything to be instantaneous and centered on our own desires. So Jesus also says to us that one of the defining characteristics of Christians is humility. One of the defining characteristics of following after Jesus is humility. It is a characteristic not innate to the person and not innate to you and me simply because we have claimed Christ. It is not as if we have blond hair or green eyes and so as we declare ourselves Christians that suddenly we are humble. It is the goal to be strived for. It is as a plane stays on course that it is a series of ever minute corrections that as Christians humility is something we constantly are reaching for, constantly adjusting for. This parable is a corrective, it is a calling and it is a warning.

The first thing that we see as we look at this parable or at least the first thing that struck me is that someone would have a sense that they belonged at the head of the table. Really what comes out of that is a sense of entitlement. A sense that we deserve it, that we are all that, so to speak, that we belong up there at the head of the table. That the spotlight should be shining on us and that others should be focused on us. Now imagine if you went to the Oscars - you got out of a taxi and you walked over the barrier onto the red carpet and there were all the stars that are

there - paparazzi snapping shots. You walk past all of that, folks being interviewed for TV, they've got on their dresses, their gowns, and you're moderately dressed. You walk into the theater and down to the front row there with Jack Nicholson and all the others that are the veritable VIP's of Hollywood and you take your seat. Before long an usher comes up to you and says, "What in the world, who are you, and what are you doing sitting here? This is not your seat, this belongs to one of the stars or celebrities and then you are escorted out not by the usher but by security. What makes you think, what makes me think, what makes us think that we belong in the lime light? That we belong at the head of the table? Ego, ego. Someone once described ego as edging God out. E-G-O. I can remember once in college, not one of my more stellar moments, after a football game being there at one of the hotels for a social and finding that on one of the floors in one of the great big ballrooms that John Tyson up there in northwest Arkansas was having a birthday party. We looked in that room and we saw all this food. We saw all this stuff going on and we kind of all looked at each other and we just sort of slipped in and thought, "You know, this is a good place to be, it looks like a lot of food." The ego to think that we could just go in there; we could do what we wanted. It wasn't very long before John Tyson walked up to the group of us and said "Hi, I'm John Tyson and who are you?" and one of my friends just stuck out his hand and said "I'm George Hayes." The ego of that, I think John knew enough to realize to just leave us alone. I think he just laughed and walked on. Not where we needed to be but it's ego that says to us I'm special, that the rules don't apply to me and that I know best.

According to a new comprehensive study by five psychologists today's college students are more narcissistic and self centered than their predecessors. From 1982 to 2006, 16,475 college students completed an evaluation called The Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the NPI. The inventory asked for rated responses to standard questions such as; "If I ruled the world it would be a better place," "I think I am a special person" and "I can I live my life the way I want to." The nationwide results were quite telling. The head of the study, a San Diego State University Professor said we need to stop endlessly repeating you're special and having children repeat that back. Kids are self centered enough already. The researchers traced the phenomenon of this narcissism back to the self esteem movement that emerged in the 1980's. They contest the effort to build self confidence has gone too far. As an example Twinge sited the lyrics of a song commonly sung to the tune of Freer Jacques in preschools. "I am special I am special, look at me, look at me." There is then - since we think of ourselves as special, of feeling that the world is ours, our oyster, so to speak, that it's ours on a string, that we are the heirs of all that exists and it is therefore us and us alone, there is something insane about that -- insanity. And we think of

insanity as an asylum and folks in straight jackets. We don't tend to think of arrogance, or over exceeding pride, narcissism or self-centeredness as insanity.

John Nash for whom the movie A Beautiful Mind was written, the Nobel Prize winning mathematician who suffered all his life from schizophrenia said this, "Madness can be an escape, if things are not so good you maybe want to imagine something better. In madness I thought that I was the most important person in the world." You can, in of the community of mental health, trace out this idea of self centeredness. This idea of preoccupation of self, this ego run wild, trace it to the limits of insanity and then look back on ourselves. It was psychologist Milton Roarkeack who wrote the book The Three Christ's of the Ypsilanti who did just that. He took those in the asylum who had the strongest most disturbed messiah complexes and he began to study them and as he would talk to them they would say, "I am the son of God." They would began to rant and rave and he would write it all down and he was trying to make some sense of this ego that had exalted itself so high as to think of oneself as a messiah. And then he came up with the bright idea, just as an experiment, to take three of the toughest nuts and just put them together, just have them live in the same area, in the same common place and have them interact with one another. And it didn't take long before someone in a fit of rage threw something across the room and he very calmly as a psychiatrist would ask "Now why would you do that?" and the patient would reply, "Because God told me to." Then one of his fellow inmates would say, "No, I didn't." What he found in this insanity of interaction, of ego vaunted so high, was that as they were placed together, these self-centered to the extreme people, that they began to show some signs of recovery. It's a crazy idea. John Ortberg comments on this illustration - taking a group of diluted would-be messiahs and putting them into community to see if they could be cured. But it has been done before. A reasoning arose among them as to who should be the greatest. Luke tells us of Jesus' followers. Maybe the idea of a social setting and of a dinner is not too far off the mark in terms of what is rehabilitative and healthy for us. For each of us is self-centered to some degree and in some way. Each of us looks to our own interest over the interest of others. Each of us is wrapped up in our own egos in that insanity. So we find ourselves here together. Here in community as a way, as a way of finding health, as way of finding humility, which is the opposite of what is shown in our parable. There is this difference to the Christian community, there is this difference in terms of how we live and are and how we present ourselves and humility is one distinguishing characteristic of that witness.

As I try to think about defining humility, I have always liked that idea of being right sized. It fits well with our parable too. The size that you are to take at the station of the table, the size of not being at the head, not being at the top but finding that you are willing to come in and

take your place at the bottom. Claiming no special treatment, no vaunted privilege, coming as one who is simply glad to be there. Instead of I am special -- you are special. Instead of look at me -- let me look after you.

So we think of understanding humility. I was always amazed by Scott Wieland's interview with Rolling Stone magazine. He was convicted for the possession of drugs when he was a member of the band Stone Temple Pilots. He spent time in jail and as he came out of that experience and reflected upon it to the magazine Wieland kept repeating the word humility. He says, "It's not me thinking less of myself it's me thinking of myself less." It's not thinking less of myself in this sort of exercise of degradation of finding ourselves, if you will, making ourselves feel as if we are worms and less-than and defective. It is simply a matter of thinking of ourselves less. Of thinking of another. Setting aside the ego and finding that attitude of servant hood and of love and of care. Of looking outside our own interest and wants to the care and well being of another.

Robert Monroe said, "What is humility? It is that habitual quality whereby we live in the truth of things. The truth that we are creatures and not the creator. The truth that our life is a composite of good and evil, light and darkness. The truth that in our littleness we have been given extravagant dignity. Humility is saying a radical yes to the human condition. A realization that we are sinners. That we flawed, that we are imperfect, that we are in need of God, that we share this common humanity.

It is the monastic community more than any other that has held up the ideal of humility. So we turn back in time to Thomas A Kempis. He says, "Take delight in being unknown and unregarded. A true understanding and humble estimate of one's self is the highest and most valuable of all lessons. To take no account of one's self but to always think well and highly of others is the highest wisdom. We are all weak; we are all frail. Consider none frailer than yourself." This willingness to identify in a common humanity. This willingness to see that we are not set apart as better than, as more than, as special but to have the humility to say "not I am special -- you are special. Not look at me but -- let me look after you.

There's a difference in being a Christian. One of those differences is humility. Our parable today comes as a parable really of the last judgment. Of saying to us that those who have exalted themselves will be brought down and be humbled and those who have humbled themselves will be exalted. It is those who have come in lowliness that the rewards of God are promised and the presumptive, arrogant, egotistical life will be humiliated. I am not special -- you are special. Do not look at me -- let me look after you. There is a difference. Amen.