

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 28, 2016  
St. Luke 14:1, 7-14  
Following Christ in Self-Denial  
Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Two popularly sought after attitudes today are humility and self-denial. I hope you got the “irony” in that sentence. In fact, when someone denies self and looks after another first, we see it on the news. Acts of selflessness and humility are “man bites dog” stories. There is amazement when it happens. There is hope that things really aren’t as far gone as they at times may seem.

This may be true in the secular world. It is not true in the kingdom of God. The powers for humility and self-denial are Jesus’ humility and self-denial as our Savior. These qualities do not seek honor or advantage or privilege for self. They look to do good to those who cannot repay.

Our Savior fully expects us to follow him in self-denial. This is the lesson Jesus taught when he “went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee.” **Following Christ in Self-Denial.** In genuine humility. In unselfish charity.

Already Jesus “was being carefully watched.” They who were proud in their righteousness were suspicious of this man who always looked after sinners first. Instead of avoiding his enemies, our Lord accepted one’s Sabbath dinner invitation. Jesus took every opportunity to teach. The reading skips over Jesus healing a sick man in the house. The Savior modeled for the Pharisees true obedience to the law; not the keeping of an outward holy day but love.

Jesus then used the dinner seating as the stepping off point for his parable on humility. “He noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table.” We are familiar with it. Maybe we have lived it. Have you ever picked the best place to sit, and then someone else came along who is supposed to sit there? You have to move. How embarrassing!

It would have been much better to take a more humble approach. You choose a less desirable seat. What a joy to have someone invite us to take a better seat! Instead of humiliation and embarrassment “you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.” This is exactly what the eternal Son of God did to save us sinners from the guilt and punishment of our transgressions.

Paul put it this way to the Philippians, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; who, being in very nature with God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross.” [2:5-8] His Father has exalted Jesus to the highest place because he did this. We honor Jesus because he did that for us.

Humility is not some moral virtue, a sort of reverse pride. Jesus is not acting here, as I mentioned last week, as a new Moses. He is not commanding us to be humble. He is moving us by his self-denial as our Savior to live opposite the sin of the Pharisees. They believed they were better than others, superior in their virtue. Humility is first and foremost the admission before God that I am sinful. Humility is waiting on God to exalt us rather than in pride vainly attempting to exalt ourselves and exchange places with God so we sit on his throne.

This is what Jesus means when he said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Following Christ in self-denial is not only to live in

genuine humility before God and others. Following Christ in self-denial also leads to unselfish charity.

Self-denial is the quality of love that first and foremost recognizes the cares and needs of others. Jesus denied himself of the full use of his power and glory to live in humiliation as our Savior under the law. He denied himself and did not come down from the cross to show his enemies, but remained there to suffer our eternal punishment for sin and guilt. Jesus recognized our cares and needs and gave himself up for us even when we could not repay him.

Jesus shifts a bit in the second part of his use of the meal. Now it was about the host's attitude, not the guest's attitude. The host was not to invite the cream of the crop-his friends, fellow Pharisees, relatives or the rich. They probably would invite him in return. There was no self-denial or humility in inviting those who would repay your invitation. No, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be paid at the resurrection of the righteous."

As I said about humility, it is true about charity. Charity is not a moral virtue by which I can manifest my goodness. This is not a command. Charity is following Christ in self-denial. Such an invitation is the result of knowing that I am among that group. While Christian charity for those in these literal conditions is to be commanded, Jesus' words go beyond that. Jesus point is that they cannot repay. Charity is love and generosity for those who cannot do the same.

This is most true of course with us and God. We cannot repay God for his undeserved love and generosity of blessing for us in Jesus Christ our Savior. God does not expect us to repay him. God does not punish us when we do not repay him with our good works. The invitation of the gospel of forgiveness in Christ goes out to all. It is appreciated by those who are poor in spirit, crippled, lame and blind in the recognition of our lost condition. We will be blessed as hosts who invite and welcome them into our midst.

The repayment comes from the blessing of God on Judgment Day. He will acknowledge our charity as following Christ in self-denial in faith when we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, gave the thirsty a cup of water. He will acknowledge that we took the good news of their Savior to one and all not just to those we thought could be of advantage to us.

The moral of Jesus' parable is not "Be humble, be charitable." His saving message is, "I have denied myself to redeem you from sin, death and the devil. Now, deny yourselves and follow me. I look to see you following me in self-denial to your entrance into the eternal banquet of righteousness and peace in eternity." Amen. <SDG>