

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 12
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Where do you find true greatness?

Do not honor yourself in a king's presence.
Do not stand in a place reserved for great people,
⁷ because it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than for you to be humiliated before a ruler whom your eyes have seen.

—Proverbs 25:6,7 EHV

Do you know how to apply these words to your life? At first glance, these words may not seem to apply to us at all. I mean, how many of us will actually find ourselves in a king's presence? Maybe we could understand this if we associate these words with the President of the United States or some other dignitary. But even then, at a quick glance, these words seem easy to apply to our lives. Don't obnoxiously put yourself forth in the presence of someone great. Stay in the background and wait for him to invite you up. There. Amen. Short sermon for today, right?

But here's the thing with these short sayings from Proverbs. They beg the reader to wrestle with them. The majority of this book consists of these two-line or four-line short sayings whose meaning isn't always apparent when you first read them.

We need to think about these more deeply. We need to wrestle with them. And by wrestling with them, you walk away with that Proverb's wisdom that is much closer to your heart than if someone had just told you plainly and you could just shrug it off.

So, let's wrestle. I'm sure you have already ascertained that this proverb is not just about kings and nobles. It's more than that. It's about pride and presumption. It's about the way we view ourselves and the way we treat others.

In the spirit of the back-to-school season, can I illustrate these words with an example from the high school cafeteria? I received this illustration from a friend of mine, and I like it. I know that not all high school cafeterias are the same but go with me on this. It's the first day of school. You make your way through the lunch line and fill up your tray with food. And then you stand there scanning the cafeteria for a place to sit. And there's one empty spot left at the cool kids' table. What do you do?

You know the guy behind you has his eye on the same spot. So, what do you do? Do you make a mad dash while staying as cool and calm and collected as possible? Ah, but that could end badly.

What if the cool kids at the table say, "Sorry, that seat is saved for someone else." So, maybe you go with option 2. You don't make the mad dash. You just let him have it, and you start a new table. Now that could end badly, too. What if no one else joins you, and your worst nightmare comes true? Eating alone. Sitting there by yourself, scarfing down your food so that you can get out of there as fast as possible. It feels as though there is the spotlight on you, signaling to everybody else that you don't have friends.

(I'm sorry if I am drumming up any bad memories from high school.) But let's use this illustration as we wrestle with this proverb. When you are scanning the cafeteria looking for a place to sit, where would Proverbs 25 have you go? Don't race for the last spot

The over-confident person rates himself high in his own heart and wants everyone to know it. And then there's the under-confident person who thinks he is awful and doesn't want anyone to find out. They rate themselves totally differently, but they share a big thing in common. They are both completely obsessed with themselves and what other people think about them. You see, that's the warning in Proverbs 25. Obsession with self.

Self-obsession and self-promotion are a recipe for disaster. The warning that we heard in our second reading today, from James 2, aligns with this. Showing favoritism or manipulating people for your own self-honor is evil.

Jesus also talked about that in our Gospel for today. When he was invited to a dinner party at a Pharisee's house, he said, **"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"** (Luke 14:11). Jesus isn't teaching good manners. He's teaching something about our heart. Jesus' concern is where we are looking for greatness. Where do you find true greatness?

Listen to this. You will not find true greatness by being the smartest, or the funniest, or the prettiest, or the richest, or the most likeable, or the most respectable. Not that there's anything wrong with having plenty of friends to sit with at the cafeteria. Not that there's anything wrong with being a CEO of a company or having good looks or wealth. But those things are not metrics for greatness.

My friends, if those are the things you are focusing on for your own greatness, in stuff like that, well then just wait until that euphoria wears off. Because as we talked about a few weeks ago, that's all vapor. It doesn't last.

No, true greatness isn't found in those things. To find true greatness, you have to go to the other end of the spectrum. What's the opposite of a self-promoting existence and self-promoting pride? Humility? Selflessness? Maybe to put it even more simply, the opposite is *love*.

Go back to the cafeteria illustration. Which one's greater? The kid who accomplishes his goal of getting the last seat at the cool kids' table and remains the center of attention the whole lunch period long? Or the kid who scans the room looking for someone who could use a friend and who goes to him and lifts him up? Where do you find true greatness?

Or here's another example. What's the greatest thing *God* has ever done? Well, he did some pretty great things, didn't he? He created the universe. He raised people from the dead. He fed thousands. He did some really great things. And he did all of that *not* from selfish ambition. No, he did all of that from selfless love.

But I don't think you and I would say that those things of infinite power would top the list of the greatest things God has ever done.

What's the great thing? God died for you. And not because he needed us. He's God. He didn't need us. There wasn't anything about us that was worthy of redemption. But to use the language of the proverb, the king said, **"Come up here."** And he prepared a seat at his table with your name on it by coming down here and taking your self-obsession and vain conceit and the pain that those things caused in the

You see, my friends, greatness can't be taken. It can only be given. God gives it. You can't earn it. And that means that when you follow in Jesus' footsteps and stoop down low to serve, just wait for what Jesus promises you on the other side. True greatness given by him. Amen.