

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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God lifts up the humble

One Sabbath day, when Jesus went into the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat bread, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When he noticed how they were selecting the places of honor; he told the invited guests a parable. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline in the place of honor, or perhaps someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. ⁹ The one who invited both of you may come and tell you, ‘Give this man your place.’ Then you will begin, with shame, to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ “But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will tell you, ‘Friend, move up to a higher place.’ Then you will have honor in the presence of all who are reclining at the table with you. ¹¹ “Yes, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” ¹² He also said to the one who had invited him, “When you make a dinner or a supper, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, so that perhaps they may also return the favor and pay you back. ¹³ “But when you make a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. Certainly, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous.”

—Luke 14:1, 7-14

Today in our text, Jesus says, **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”**

Do you see that to be true in our world? I think the opposite is what we often find, isn't it? Instead of listening to each other and respectfully trying to understand others, people are quick to exalt their own ideas and thoughts above others. Just think about what you see in the political world. It's disheartening that politicians cannot even sit across the table from each other in order to discuss issues. They feel as though they need to yell at each other, beat each other down and bolster themselves up.

Isn't that more of what we see in our world? And it's not just in the political world. Children do this on the football field. They boast that they are better than the other team. They puff themselves up. Adults do it too. Maybe we don't say it out loud, but we think it. “I can do better than that.”

Pride, arrogance, self-exaltation ... isn't that what we often times see? So here's Jesus today. And he says in no uncertain terms, **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”**

So what is humility? Where does it start? I would venture to say that true humility starts with a careful look at how we stand before God. Do you know what I mean?

In its core definition, humility means **“to empty yourself of yourself.”** And that would happen by taking a careful look at how we stand before God.

When I look at just myself and God, I quickly realize that there is *nothing* I can offer to him. Everything that I can think about in my life is tainted with sin. It's stained. I can't give my holy God a single thing that would be worth anything to him. That's where true humility starts. It starts with us taking a close look at ourselves and realizing that we have *nothing* to offer God. Now, of course, true humility goes somewhere. It doesn't just end with us feeling horrible about our situation before a holy God. But before I talk about where true humility goes, I want to direct your attention to the Gospel for today, from Luke 14.

Luke is describing a situation where Jesus, the Lord of everything, the King of the universe is invited to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee. Now, at first, you might think that this was a really nice gesture by this Pharisee guy, right? These Pharisees were always attacking Jesus, so the fact that one of them invited Jesus over for a meal was a really nice gesture, right? But then Luke tells us, **“One Sabbath day, when Jesus went into the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat bread, they were watching him closely.”** Ah, now we get to the real reason for the invitation, don't we? The Pharisees were carefully watching Jesus. They had orchestrated this meal as an opportunity to watch Jesus and see if he might say something or do something which they could pounce on and shout, “See! He is not the Messiah!”

But notice what Jesus does. He saw an opportunity to teach an important lesson to those around him. So, while the Pharisees were watching Jesus, Jesus was watching the Pharisees.

And the first thing he couldn't help noticing was their scramble for the best seats at the banquet. Now remember who these Pharisees are. It ties in to Jesus' teaching of humility. And remember that true humility starts with realizing that we have nothing to offer God.

You see, the Pharisees thought that they had a lot to offer God. "Pharisees," means "separate ones." They thought of themselves as separate from everyone else. They were a religious group of people, the churchgoers who thought that they were better than everybody else. They considered themselves to be righteous, pure, a cut above all the sinners of the land. With noses in the air, inflated egos, and puffed up with pride, they naturally scrambled for seats of honor. After all, who could be more worthy of honor than a Pharisee? Jesus observes all this. He sees all this.

So Jesus told them a little story. **"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline in the place of honor, or perhaps someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. The one who invited both of you may come and tell you, 'Give this man your place.' Then you will begin, with shame, to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will tell you, 'Friend, move up to a higher place.' Then you will have honor in the presence of all who are reclining at the table with you."**

What point is Jesus making? Jesus, of course, is not writing a book on proper etiquette at a dinner party. He's not giving a "How-to-manual-on-rising-to-the-top." His main concern is not the fact that the Pharisees are scrambling for the prime place around the dinner table. That's not why he told this story. No, we need to hear Jesus where he gives us the real reason for this story. He says, **"Yes, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."**

The Pharisees thought they were big stuff. They were the high and mighty. Jesus knew that they were in tremendous spiritual danger. Anybody who puffs himself up, thinks highly of himself, thinks that he has something to offer God will soon be humiliated before God and all his people. Why? Because that person is focusing on himself. His eyes are fixed on what *he* can offer to God. And that's a bad place to focus on, isn't it?

So humility starts with an honest evaluation of how we stand before God. I have nothing to offer. What can a human being contribute to make God open the door to his heavenly banquet and say, "Ah, welcome! Come on in! I've got a prominent place for you?" What can a sinful human being do to cause God to like us? Nothing! The Pharisees did not see that. An honest evaluation of our attitudes and behavior using God's measuring stick proves us to be lowly and lost. As we look into God's heart and mind, we see that we have nothing to offer him. And therefore, humility begins when we are completely emptied of ourselves. That's an important part of humility. But remember that I said that humility goes somewhere.

You see, when I am emptied of myself, that's where the miraculous power of God comes in. The apostle James picked up the theme. In chapter 4 of his letter, he writes, **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, ...that is, Empty yourselves of you ... and God will lift you up."** Peter says the same thing when he wrote in his first letter, chapter 5, **"Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand that *he* may lift you up in due time."** Think about a cup. When a cup is filled with something, it can't be filled with something else. So it is with us. When we are filled with ourselves, we can't be filled with God's grace and power.

Solomon was teaching us that truth in our First Lesson for today. **"Do not honor yourself in a king's presence. Do not stand in a place reserved for great people, because it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than for you to be humiliated before a ruler."**

We don't have any earthly kings in our midst, but we understand what Solomon is saying in Proverbs, right? Don't toot your own horn. God does not want us to lift ourselves up and boast and brag about how good we are. He doesn't want us to be filled with ourselves. Rather, he wants us to be deflated of ourselves so that *he* can fill us up. And only God can do that. Only God can give us honor in his presence.

And, my friends, why does God do that? Not because of anything great inside of us. We know how we stand before him. But he lifts us up because of his great *mercy*. Christianity is the only religion in the entire world that talks of a God like this. All other religions talk about some effort we need to give to lift ourselves up to God. Christianity is the only religion that talks about a God who says, "You can't do that! You can't lift yourself up to me. It's impossible." So God does something about that.

Oh, if only the Pharisees knew who was standing in their midst. If only they saw Jesus as he truly is. If only they saw that Jesus is the true Son of God, who is the Almighty Lord of the whole universe. He's God who willingly came down to this earth. He willingly became one of us. He didn't come with his chest puffed up. Our God isn't like that. He came not to

be exalted, but to be humbled. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the whole world. That's your God! That's my God.

Oh, but there's more. Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross, has taken away my sin, my pride, my arrogance, my self-exaltation. They are no longer my sins. They became Jesus' sins. And because of Jesus and his work, you and I have received the greatest honor in the universe. We are the children of God! If you are ever having a low self-esteem day, isn't that truth awesome to think about? You have been given the greatest honor from God. You are a child, an heir, of the God Almighty.

True humility brings us low. It does. We see our sin. But that's just what God wants. That's when he goes to work to lift us up. Martin Luther once wrote: **“People cannot be thoroughly humbled until they get to know that their salvation lies utterly beyond their own powers and efforts and depends absolutely on the will and work of God alone. For if people are convinced that they are able to do the least thing toward their own salvation, then they retain confidence in themselves, do not utterly despair of themselves, and are not humble before God.”**

Do you see the interesting dual role we have as we go about our life with God? We have every reason to be humble when we recall who we are and what we have done. But at the same time, we can hold our heads high because of the honor God has given to us. The smile on our face is not smugness but joy in the Lord's pardoning love.

So what does that mean for you? How does this affect your life right now? You see, it changes the way we look at other people and the way we deal with other people. We realize that we are no better than anybody else. We don't deserve anything from our God. We're not going to look down our noses at other people, thinking that we're better than they are. We're not going to do that because we're *not* better than they are.

But we also know what God has done for us. We know the places of honor that he has given to us. He has made us his children through Jesus. And that gives us the greatest joy as we seek to bring that honor to others as well. Knowing that we are the children of God causes us to reach out with joy as we welcome people around us.

My encouragement to you today is to reflect that same grace that you have received from God, to reflect that grace to others. Go to where people are at. Don't be afraid to get dirty for the sake of someone else. Love people with the same love that God has shown to you. Why can you do that? Because you already have the greatest position of honor from your God. He has called you his own.

Martin Luther captures what we've been learning today when he writes, **“God's way is to make something out of nothing – life out of death, righteousness out of sin, honor out of shame. To sum up everything, he wants to deal with the lowly. Such is the nature of God.”**

So God deals with us. Be truly humble, my friends. Recognize how you match up to God. We have nothing to offer him. That's when he lifts us up on the back of Jesus. Focus on Jesus, and God will lift you up. **God lifts up the humble.** Amen.