

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
28 August 2022

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

I met the musician known as Prince once. In fact, I became known around my office as “The man who met Prince.” It all happened quite innocently. We received word that when the singer known as Prince was in New York he often went to a particular deli in Jersey City, NJ for lunch. Apparently, he and 2 or 3 of his friends would get a table in the back and eat their sandwiches while people just looked on and waved from other tables because his security would not let anyone get near. Hearing this, all the social workers in my office decided to take an extra-long lunch break, drive from Paterson to Jersey City and scope the deli, so that we would see him as he got off his limousine. (We all assumed he would be traveling in a limousine.) I arrived a few minutes late because this was my first time in Jersey City and I didn't know where to park. After some driving around, I found the perfect spot behind a new black suburban. I proceeded to park. As I was about to turn the engine off a black man dressed in sneakers, jogging pants, and a t-shirt approached the driver's side window and knocked on the glass. I opened the window and he said, “Excuse me, do you mind parking down the street, I was supposed to hold that spot for a friend and I just wasn't paying attention.” I was annoyed, but I just moved on. I was not able to find parking after all, thought the whole thing was stupid, and decided to go back to the office. The next day one of the Social Workers in the office came to me excitedly and asked, “What did he tell you?” I asked, “What do you mean?” She responded, “Prince! We saw you talking to him. You gave his security people your parking spot!” It was then that I realized I had never seen Prince before, had no idea what he looked like, and was oblivious to the fact that the man who approached the window of my car was the man himself. Of course I could not pass the opportunity to brag. I said, “He gave me \$500 dollars and two tickets to his next show in New York for the parking spot!” That's how I became known as the man who met, conversed, negotiated with, and befriended Prince on a common street in Jersey City, NJ.

I love that story for one simple reason: We all want to be associated with winners and not with losers. We want to be with the powerful. Think for example of the popular saying, “A person is judged by the company he keeps.” When you surround yourself with winners, you will be seen by others as a winner. It is important to be seen, to be included, to be admired and talked about. This is the reason why many people pay thousands of dollars to be in the company of “A-listers”, politicians, entertainers, and athletes. This is the reason why we take our picture with famous people, frame and display autographs, and drop the names of influential people we know as often as we can. We all want to be on the side of winners. No one wants to be seen as a loser and as any High School kid will tell you, nothing makes you a loser quicker than hanging out with losers.

The gospel today is talking about this type of situation. Let us set the stage.

Jesus is at a dinner party in Luke, chapter 14. Our reading jumps from verse 1 to verses 7-14, skipping verses 2-6. In those verses, Jesus is having supper at a Pharisee's house on the Sabbath, where "they were watching him closely." While seating at the table, a man who suffered from dropsy approached him and Jesus healed him on the Sabbath to the dismay of those present. According to experts, "Dropsy" is an ancient way of saying "Generalized Edema," a condition which gives us "an indication of malfunction in the body, especially congestive heart failure or kidney disease" (Green, *The Gospel of Luke*.) The main feature of this generalized edema is that the body retains water. In fact the word "dropsy" comes from the same Greek word from which we get the word water. "While the body is swollen with fluid, dropsy is accompanied by an unquenchable craving for drink. Hence this disease became a metaphor for insatiable desire, viewed as a moral failing." (Tennehill, "The Gospel of Luke".) Jesus then cures this man not just of his disease, but also of the unquenchable cravings associated with the disease.

And then, right after the healing, "he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor." He noticed how one of the unquenchable desires in the human heart is to be associated with those in power, to be in the spotlight, to be the center of attention. This human desire is seen in almost every area of our society today. Pick up any magazine at the supermarket, watch television, go to the movies... and you will see our desperate need to be seen. For that matter read the famous fairy tale, "Cinderella." How many of you did not rejoice when Cinderella finally made it to the ball and the prince suddenly turns to the grand staircase and sees her for the first time, walking regally down the marble steps? She who was invisible and a nobody, the one covered with cinders from the fireplace, is suddenly seen, discovered, included, and her life changes for ever more.

We all want to be discovered. Many of us have what I call the "Susan Boyle fantasy." For me, it goes like this: I approach this podium and most of you who know me think to yourselves, "Here we go again!" But, when I begin speaking, all of you go wild with excitement. At least 20 of you accept Christ on the spot for the first time. The pope hears about it and decides to make me a Catholic Saint, even though I am no longer a Roman Catholic. President Obama fires his chaplain on the spot and offers me the job. Reporters camp outside my house waiting for a glance at the new Billy Graham. And when I allow the crowds an audience, they all go wild!

Jesus acknowledges this need for recognition in the human heart, and he doesn't necessarily say that it is wrong. In fact a word used commonly in Scripture for this need is the word, "Exaltation". This is what will happen to the humble when we read, "Blessed are the humble for they will be exalted." There is no problem with being exalted or being discovered. The problem is the "how", "by whom", and "when."

Let us talk about the "How". How should you be recognized and exalted? Jesus says, not by grabbing the places of honor, "casing the joint", or "bumping" into someone famous. If you want to be recognized, take the lowest place, be the servant, lead a life of service to others and then you will be recognized. Be recognized by the quality of your

life and work and not because you rub shoulders with those in power. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Be recognized by the humility with which you lead your life, by your desire to do your part to enhance the quality of the party, by your willingness to put others above yourself.

Now, let us talk about the “by whom.” By whom do we wish to be discovered and exalted? If the answer is “by the beautiful people” in the cover of magazines, the fancy country clubs, and the right social circles, then we will live lives of disappointment. The attention span of those people is as short as the attention span of chickens on speed. They are always looking for the next best thing, and you will only be able to hold their attention for a very short time. The only answer to this need for exaltation is to wish to be discovered by God. In Scripture to exalt oneself is akin to arrogance, to be “puffed-up” with an inflated sense of self. And these people do not fare well, as God “casts the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly.” The only solution to this unquenchable need to be discovered is to seek to be discovered by God. To rediscover our humanity and let God be God. To be humble, which doesn’t mean to negate our skills and talents, but rather to give God the honor and glory for whatever good is found in our lives. To realize that God and God alone is the kingmaker. To acknowledge that this is God’s party and he alone has the right to determine the seating arrangements.

Lastly, let us talk about the “when”. When would we like to be discovered, to be exalted? If the answer is “here and now, on this earth, this very moment,” then we are also destined to a life of disappointment and un-fulfillment. The exaltation that Christ is talking about will only happen “at the resurrection of the righteous.” It is an exaltation that belongs to God, the true host of the banquet. Today, my brothers and sisters, let me invite all of us to lead lives of humble service and to seek God’s recognition and not just the recognition of the world. It is normal to seek some earthly recognition, but this cannot be the main purpose of our life. The main purpose of our Christian life is to give God the honor, the glory, and adoration God deserves. Our life will have a meaning only if we let God be God and allow ourselves to be fully human. After all, it is this humanity Christ died for. Our Messiah gave up his life that we might be discovered by God, the true Host of the heavenly banquet.

May his name be forever blessed. Amen!