

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)
St. Luke 14:1-11

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear redeemed of Christ, here is a topic of much importance to the Church. Jesus spoke of taking places of honor at a wedding feast. In his own way, He related this to the Great Wedding Feast—the Feast of Victory of the Lamb. So, when Jesus speaks of a wedding feast, you really have no option but to look at the Foretaste of the Feast to Come that He has given the Church to do in remembrance of Him. It is a matter of much importance to the Church because it is in this feast that Her members find their Life in Christ.

You may recall that Jesus once said that the gateway to life is narrow. (cf Matthew 7:14) There is only one gate, and it is too narrow, therefore, to enter carrying anything, like a sack of pet sins; it is too narrow to enter wearing your awards for meritorious service; it is too narrow to enter with shoulders broadened by the idea that, “I’ve done my best” (not that your best is ever good enough); it is too narrow to enter as a group—to say that you have entrance because you carry membership in a certain Christian congregation or belong to a certain family is ridiculous. The gate is wide enough for only one person at a time—a person who has been clothed with the righteousness of Christ. But the gate is nothing to be concerned about for the person who trusts in Christ. For if your entrance has already been won, then you have what’s on the other side of the door to look forward to—the Wedding Feast of the Lamb!

And for your short time on earth, you get a glimpse of that Feast in the Lord’s Supper. So, you hear these words from Jesus regarding the feast:

When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, “Give your place to this person,” and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.

Jesus began his instructions in this section by speaking to those invited to the Wedding Feast. He spoke of bad table manners, referring to the particular attitude of the individual in attendance. It is haughty for one filled with pride and self-importance to wander into the house and right up to the place of importance at the table; it is sinful to go to the table as a guest and *expect* or *demand* or think that you *deserve* to be served. It may be that you have seen it happen, perhaps even had to do it yourself—someone in either their arrogance or ignorance has to be directed away from the head table because they should not be there. It is embarrassing and humiliating when someone is told to return to where they came from and sit down.

Such a person is the kind of person with broad shoulders who will never be able to enter through that narrow gate. Their view of themselves and others is dangerously turned in upon themselves. It is the same attitude that the sons of Zebedee had when they approached Jesus and asked for the places of honor in Jesus’ glory. (cf. Mark 10:35-37) It is the same attitude of all the disciples at the Last Supper—for when Jesus had told them that He was going to be betrayed, they wondered who would do this, then they disputed among themselves, arguing about which of them should be considered the greatest. (cf. Luke 22:23-24)

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:17 KJV) If these are the actions of one with broad shoulders, then the attitude of a guest at the feast should be one of humility. The humble guest recognizes that it is by gracious invitation that he is at the table. The humble guest recognizes that it is only by that same invitation that he is even in the house—that he is through the narrow gate—that the host even wants him there!

The humble guest is like the publican who entered the temple, stayed in the back, and kept his head bowed low and confessed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." (Luke 18:13) The humble guest is like the woman who is satisfied, like a little dog, with the crumbs that fall from the master's table. (cf. Matthew 15:26-27) The humble guest is the one who approaches the table, thankful that he even has a place there.

These are the proper table manners Jesus spoke in His instructions. "But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you." There is no deserving to be served; for if you received what you deserved, there would be no Christ, no Feast, no gate, and you would all be lost and without any hope. But by God's gracious invitation, you are served the righteousness of Christ. So, you should approach the Lord's Table, rejoicing in and thankful for what you are about to receive—that is, you take that lowest place—and you are filled with Christ and His merits, those magnificent crumbs from the Master's table. You are made to be like him—you are made the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21)—you are honored in the presence of all your fellow guests and right along with them!

Take Christ's example as your own. In response to the bickering of the disciples mentioned earlier, Christ said, "For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves." (Luke 22:27) For whom is the highest place reserved? You should have no doubt, and be quick to answer "Christ," of course, and the Scriptures confirm this. But the Scriptures also confirm that Jesus switched places. For in that same night when He was betrayed, Jesus took a bowl and towel and switched places by crawling on the floor like a servant and washing His disciples' feet. He switched places with you, taking the punishment and death that you deserved. Hear it from St. Paul, who also speaks of the highest place Jesus ascended to:

[Christ Jesus] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

Christ switched places with you, granting you pardon while taking the death you deserved on the cross, taking you out of the Kingdom of Darkness, and granting you entrance into the glorious Kingdom of His marvelous Light, His kingdom.

This is a matter of much importance to the Church. Jesus has given you a Foretaste of the Feast to Come; He has given you a means by which you receive Him and His righteousness. This feast, but a mirror of the feast beyond the narrow gate, is not for the Pharisee or the one who wallows in his own self-worth; this feast is closed to those who expect or demand to be served by Christ. The gate is too narrow for these with broad shoulders. This feast is for those who have been invited by the Lord—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; it is for the sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ's saving word. This feast is for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This feast is for those who desire forgiveness for their sin.

Are you among them? If so, and you are, then this feast is for you. To you, Jesus Christ gives life...He gives forgiveness and salvation. To you, Christ opens the narrow gate—He is the narrow gate (cf. John 10:1-9)—and ushers you in where with the angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, you will laud and magnify His glorious name, evermore praising Him, and eating at the Wedding Feast which has no end. Jesus is your narrow gate and your gatekeeper, granting you entrance through His meritorious death and resurrection for you, making you the righteousness of God in Him, forgiving you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.