

Christian Humility

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Luke 14: 1, 7-14

I wonder how it is in school lunch lines today. As old Alfalfa used to say on **The Little Rascals**, “when I was a kid” there was a lot of pushing and shoving and breaking into line—all done, of course, when the teacher wasn’t watching.

We had to form a lunch line in our classroom and march about 100 yards under a sheltered walkway to the lunchroom. Since the teacher was present in the room when the line was formed, it was done quietly, orderly and peacefully. No pushing. No shoving. No breaking into line. And each day the teacher would pick a different row to begin the line. It was very thoughtful of her.

But there were many times after the class started marching to the lunchroom that the teacher would not have her eyes on the line. And that’s when it would begin. “Hey, I’m supposed to be ahead of you!” “Hey, you’re breaking into line! I’m going to tell on you!” “Move! Elephants before ants.” “Alright, Johnny, you just wait! I’ll fix you.” “Hey, look at those pipsqueaks at the back of the line! What a sorry looking bunch!”

I wonder how it is in school lunch lines today. Do new-math post-moon landing students actually push and shove and break into line? Do today’s students—the smartest ever—actually jump and lunge and holler out, “Last one in line is a rotten egg!”

I wonder how it is in school lunch lines today. Probably no different than it has ever been in school lunch lines. For today’s students have been born and bred into a day and time and culture where the desire to be first—at the head of the line—has been cultivated to the nth degree. First on the moon. First in technology. First in grades. First in this. First in that. And if not first, then way up at the front of the line—whatever line it is. I went to school with a girl who made straight A’s all the way from the first grade through the first semester of the last year in college. When the last semester’s work in college had been completed and the grades came out and she made her first A-minus, she nearly went crazy! Now, all this is a way of introducing the meat of today’s Gospel lesson, a gospel lesson that has to do with the business of where the Christian—the follower of Christ—puts himself in line, or more accurately, where the Christian finds himself in line.

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It's a very familiar Gospel lesson—one you've heard read and preached on and one you have studied many times. But do not be put off or put to sleep by its familiarity. There is no such place of honor in the lunch line of Christian education. There are still surprises in store in this Gospel lesson for those who will listen.

Jesus has been invited out to lunch. His host is a very prominent Jewish leader—a member of the elitist Pharisees, the Pharisees being a branch of Judaism that laid heavy emphasis on The Law of Moses and on The Jewish Holiness Code. The Pharisees, as you remember, were also scholars and teachers and educators. They knew the writings of scripture as you know the back of your hand. Paul, the author of 2/3 of the New Testament, was a Pharisee. Today, I suppose, the Pharisees would find their counterparts among seminary-educated ministers and seminary and college professors of religion.

Well, one of these Pharisees invited Jesus out to lunch. And as the text reads, these Pharisees "... were watching him." Jesus had a reputation among the Pharisees for being radical and unpredictable and uncanny and uncouth. He was regarded by many of them as a wild man—a fanatic. Not a few of them regarded him as a threat to all that The Law of Moses and The Jewish Holiness Code stood for. And as is the case with people who are capable of being shocked and outraged, the Pharisees wanted an opportunity to be shocked and outraged—so one of their number invited Jesus out to lunch at his home so that he and all his Pharisee-friends could watch Jesus—so that they could observe him, his speech, his behavior, his teaching, his table manners—for some little something to be shocked over and to be outraged about. This they knew would give them a very prominent place—a place of honor—at the kosher table of Judaism. For as is the case with all who desire places of honor—places at the head of the lunch line—any line, there is a need to watch—to look—to observe—for just the right moment to move—to sneak—to the head of the line—to the place of honor—while the teacher—the person in charge—is not looking. "One Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him."

The only problem was that Jesus was watching them too. "Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked (when he saw) how they chose the places of honor ..." Have you ever seen something going on and wanted to say something about it but didn't? Something which bothered you or made you happy and you wanted to say something critical or complimentary, but you didn't? You just kept your mouth shut, for whatever reason or the lack of a reason? Well, in this case Jesus didn't keep his mouth shut. He spoke up. For what it is worth, he put his two cents' worth in.

He did something in this instance that most of us would never think or dream of doing—he challenged the choices of seats at the table that his fellow guests had made. Just imagine being invited out to lunch with some other people—all you are is a guest like everyone else—and your going up to some of them after they have seated themselves at the table and your saying to them, "Listen, I don't think it is wise for you to sit there. I think you ought to sit somewhere else. The host might not like you sitting there. Please move." Why, it would be the biggest insult and breach of social grace that anyone could possibly

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come up with. You are only an invited guest—like everyone else. It is the host's job to tell people where to sit at the table. And even if you know for a surety that someone is sitting where he shouldn't sit, you are obligated by Miss Manners, Emily Post and all the books of etiquette that have ever been written to keep your mouth shut.

Jesus spoke up. "When you are invited by anyone to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' 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, go up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Yes, Jesus spoke up and no doubt embarrassed his fellow guests to a profound degree. They were already in their places and even if they didn't belong there, that was up to the host to say. Not Jesus. Unless, of course, the writer of this Gospel, Luke, is trying to tell us that Jesus said this because he was in fact The Host. But let's come back to that.

Jesus told his fellow guests something about humility and exaltation—something about where one puts oneself in the lunch line—or more specifically, about where one is to be in the lunch line. And the sad thing about these words of Jesus which we have heard most of our lives is that they have frequently been mis-explained and misunderstood.

When most of us think about humility, we think about a passive sort of thing. Humility to many Christians is a ride in the back seat—a holding of the door for everyone else—a standing at the back of the line—a you open your presents first—a you take this chair—an after you—a waiting until all the others have gone first. When I was a child, I was taught that JOY meant, "Jesus, Others, You." And I tell you, as a hungry little boy there was very little joy in waiting until all those people ahead of me went through the line at congregational dinners. I thought I would never get to the food!

This sort of thing—taking second place to others—is a part of Christian humility, but a very small part. And this is true because Christian humility does not know that it is humble. And in much of so-called Christian humility, there is a great deal of calculation and planning. Christian humility does not plan to be humble—does not calculate to be humble. It is simply humble. Someone has put it this way: when you know you are humble; you are not humble. Another way to put it is: Christian humility is blind to itself. You've heard the story of the man who boasted that he was humbler than anyone he knew!

But there is more to be said. Christian humility has to do—first and foremost—with being in tune with the will of God. It is highlighted for us in scripture in the words, "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in 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, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of

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men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-9)

This is what Christian humility has to do with— being in tune with the will of God. Jesus humbled himself in that he accepted the will of God in his thoughts, in his words and in his deeds.

And at times, it was a passive sort of thing. At times, it was taking a back seat to others. But it was also active, very active, and out in front. It allowed a woman one time to pour \$10,000 worth of perfume over his head and feet. It performed miracles of healing that were talked about all over the countryside. It stood up in the synagogue at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and had him announce: “I have come to bring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, release to the captives.” It had him proclaim on another occasion, “I am The Bread of Life. He who eats of me shall never hunger.”

Humble words? Only if your understanding of Christian humility has room for action and dynamic movement. Christian humility—the true kind—is very active and has dynamic movement. It is the active and dynamic movement of being in tune with the will of God and all that that entails. It is more something which happens to you than something you bring upon yourself. In fact, you only participate in humbling yourself to the extent that you do not reject the will of God. Being a part of the will of God—being in tune with the will of God—is something which God himself brings upon you. In that sense it is passive. But once you are in tune with the will of God—once you are humble—then you become very active and dynamic.

And it is that kind of active and dynamic humility that Jesus is advocating to the Pharisees in today’s Gospel lesson. When Jesus told them what he did, he was saying that they had the opportunity to be in tune with the will of the Host, by whom Jesus meant God himself. They could not humble or exalt themselves, as they frequently tried to do by obeying this law or that law (630 such laws altogether), and as was illustrated in their choosing places of honor at the luncheon. Only the Host—God himself—can humble. And only the Host—God himself—can exalt. However, one can reject the Host’s wishes. And Jesus—who was and his God himself—did not want them to do that.

When Jesus said, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”, he was saying, “For everyone who tries to elevate himself—socially, politically, religiously—by himself—thinking he actually can do it, he will necessarily be humbled—that is, he who accepts the will of God for his life and who acts in tune with the will of God, he is the one whom God himself will exalt—will elevate.”

And as I said before, the will of God involves action and dynamic movement. It involves feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, releasing those who are unjustly captive. It involves active and dynamic love—the kind of love that does not seek to be loved in return. It can have a great deal to do with the kind of people you end up inviting out to lunch at your house or

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your church—the kind of people who are standing in the lunch line at your own house or church—literally.

This kind of Christian humility—which is the only kind—will leave you very little time for pushing and shoving and breaking into line—for competing for choice places at the lunch table. This is true because God is The Host who has already said to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, “Friend, go up higher.” This, and only this, is our honor in the presence of all who sit at table with us.

Amen.

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