

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the greatest, the most important, of all the Christian virtues? Almost all of us answer that question with the word, “love.” We would say with the Apostle Paul, “So faith, hope and love, the greatest of these is love.” But it is important to remember that Jesus did not.

Remember that the disciples of Jesus were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom of God. At various times in our reading of the Gospels, we hear Jesus making reference to his followers as “children”, or “little child”. Jesus replied, “Whoever humbles himself like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.”

“Like a little child.” Before they get to first grade, when there is no conceit. No need to be number one. No need to be better than other children. In this story for today, what makes a child great is not their faith, but what? What is arguably the greatest of all Christian virtues?

On a Sabbath, Jesus is dining at the home of "a ruler of the Pharisees." He notices the most mundane thing...something absolutely ordinary, commonplace. People taking their places at the table at this banquet. So what? Big deal.

But it moves Jesus into sharing a parable. And, as fascinating as other parables found in Luke can be...like that of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son...this particular one seems rather every-day and not extraordinary at all. He talks about taking a place at the table....and not just any table like this one he has been invited to, but a table at a wedding feast. Using the example of a wedding feast is to be polite because the wider point, the essential point is not *this dinner*, but how we live our lives generally.

To his host, Jesus gives further advice to invite those he probably never thought of inviting, because they could never repay the favor. In fact, perhaps, to see for the first time people he had never seen. Such an act of kindness will not go unnoticed as Jesus tells us, as did the prophets before him, that God notices such things.

Again the ruler is invited to see himself. After all, he has probably taken the seat of honor many times, maybe even without thinking about it. If he now mingles with the poor and outcast, even to take the humblest seat among them, maybe he will see himself...the love of God...heaven itself...in a completely new light.

Is this just about good etiquette, or more? Luke calls it a parable so we are invited to look for an extension of Jesus' meaning. Why? Because the language of the parable typically frames a story which is intentionally used by Jesus to help us understand the reign, the kingdom of God. And in our understanding for today, arising out of this parable, there are two high points.

The first is the more obvious, answering the question posed earlier in this sermon...the greatest of all Christian virtues. As shared in this parable, Jesus says that it is **humility**. The profound awareness and quality of life where there is no need to be better than other human beings. Where there is no need to use the gifts that God has given us to elevate ourselves above other people.

At the heart of this quality of humility is an attitude of the heart which realizes that all of our gifts

come from God. All of my/your talent. All of our money. All my personality traits which allow me to advance in life. Everything that I have is a gift from God. Humility is grounded in this deep psychological awareness, and one cannot have genuine humility without it.

I remember some years ago reading in the Sunday morning Syracuse paper a full, two column obituary for a deceased female physician from Cazenovia. Two full columns...that costs a bundle...detailing her life's education, her professional accomplishments, all of it. I looked at the bottom of the obit for some funeral service information...nothing. No services. No memorial.

And I thought...such richness in this world, but such poverty in the next. Where is the thanks given to

God, either during her lifetime or in her death? And I felt so sorry for her, in spite of all her doings.

C S Lewis remarks in his book entitled "Mere Christianity" that the one sin no one will admit to is pride. "There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people except Christians ever imagine that they are guilty themselves . . . There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves the more we dislike it in others."

The second high point of this parable is not as obvious. But, for us...people of faith living surrounded by the western culture of the 21st century...it is essential and is the driving force of my personal ministry.

It is true that the advice Jesus gives sounds pretty shrewd. It does not require theological insight, but does presuppose some social savvy. It would be simple to read the text as good table manners for living wisely. Sounds like it should be found in Proverbs instead. But lurking behind the mundane, everyday choices made...at a public banquet or anywhere else...is something of a more theological nature.

This is confirmed all the more with the closing verse of the unit, Chapter 14:11. Here we have migrated fully away from good advice about table manners to explicit theological language: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Imagine...what starts off as secular becomes a revealing place of God's purposes "in, with, and under!" Now, Jesus launches into counter-intuitive advice...for everything, and not just a meal. If you are celebrating a meal, do not think in terms of the typical guest list. All they will do is repay you and then the circle is complete. But, there is something more at stake with inviting those who cannot repay: "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind". They cannot repay you as the others do in a typical social setting. Yet, in living life like this, a horizon opens up in the midst of the ordinary, as he says, "... you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" This is something profoundly prophetic, even theological.

The question becomes what we do with it. This parable is a small window opening into the very nature of life itself...because all of life...all of it...is theological. Everything we do in contact with others, with creation...it is all theological. We do not think of ourselves as theologians...but we are. And what we tend to do, affected by the world around us, is to run into a further theological danger: we

tend to turn our lives into a way to manage God, thinking “What must I/we do to secure God’s good graces and the right heavenly payback?”

Our world is set up to expect an equal swap rate in negotiating relationships. If I do this, then you will do that. Called a quid pro quo. Then, here comes Jesus, who basically says, “yeah, that whole quid pro quo thing? That’s not going to fly in the Kingdom of God.” “And why?”, we might ask Jesus. “Well, let me tell you why,” says Jesus.

The problem with a quid pro quo mentality is measurement. Figuring the quantities. How do you measure or calculate the repayment of love, of mercy? To think that we can is a rather striking theological problem. We tend to forget that our beliefs about faith and discipleship are also claims about who we think God is. If we insist that our faith, our salvation, is dependent upon an equal rate of exchange between God and us, then we need to ask ourselves, in what kind of God do we believe? What happens if we do not measure up? And what makes us think we can assume certain systems to quantify the grace of God?

We even do that in church. That the value of our work might actually lead to some sort of equivalency of effort, like higher attendance, thriving programs, more money in the offering plates. And so we focus on result, with the expectation that the church pews will be full, Sunday school will be busting at the seams, and our preaching will change every single life present on a Sunday morning. And what is the result? We measure our worth based on models of outside evaluations and expectations rather than our inside and intrinsic incarnational presence and power.

We expect God to move about in our economies that are dependent on proof of worth and jobs well done. We assume God will choose to maintain a relationship with us based on our ministry performance. But then we forget a key theological premise of Luke: God’s measure of membership in the Kingdom has everything to do with how God sees us and not how we see ourselves.

We must imagine something different, not only for the sake of the future of the church, but for the sake of our own survival in ministry. I try to preach that our ministry should NOT be about survival, which brings it into the quid pro quo quotient, but rather should be about *life* – a thriving, joyful life, for all of us. Why? Because that is the very essence of God...to give and grant life.

How we quantify actions of faith and from faith, how we adjudicate the work of the Kingdom of God, cannot be held to the same systems of assurance as that of the world’s adjudication of value.

Acts of discipleship are not a means to an end. They are a means toward God’s end of growing the Kingdom of God in our midst here and now.

I am ordained, but as we are all baptized, we are all ministers...in our own ways. So, if your ministry is a constant state of not measuring up in your mind, let’s talk.

If your preaching is a perceived persistently failed performance because it has not changed lives on the spot, let’s talk.

If your sense of call seems to be unending failed attempts at who you know yourself to be, let’s talk.

Our quid pro quo world has seeped into our ministry and taken hold. But, together, we can reevaluate and insist...first to ourselves, then to those we accompany in a life of faith...that God’s

expectations are not in exchange for God's love, but only so that we might more fully live the lives God so desires for us and envisions for us.

So, as we approach this Labor Day holiday weekend, reflecting on the labors and sacrifices of everyone who has, does, or will labor on in the work that God gives them to do, let us also give ourselves humbly before God...not counting the cost of it all, but rejoicing in the blessings that we have with every breath, every glimpse, every encounter...all in the loving embrace of God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.