

10.1.2023 Trinity 17 (St. Luke 14:1-11)

When reading through the Gospels we find that one of the most common ways Jesus taught was through parables. At first glance, to people in our day, a parable may seem to be nothing more than the ancient equivalent of the modern sermon illustration, simply a colorful and memorable way for Jesus to explain doctrine that may have caused some confusion among those who came to hear Him teach, but the parables of our Lord are not sermon illustrations. A parable is in fact a fictional story, filled with vivid imagery, that's intended to convey a profound spiritual lesson to those who have "*ears to hear*" (Matthew 11:15), to those whose hearts are open to receiving the Truth. So, while parables paint a vivid word picture that reveals the truth to some, parables also conceal the truth from others.

One of the many examples of that fact is found immediately after Jesus presents the Parable of the Sower. After telling the story of the man who went out to sow, and how some seeds fell along the path, others on rocky ground or among thorns, and other seeds that fell on good soil, our Lord's disciples came to Him and asked, "*Why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them*" (Matthew 13:10-11, 13-15).

Parables reveal the truth to those whose hearts are open, while simultaneously concealing the truth from the heart that has grown dull. May we keep that fact in mind as we consider these words from our Gospel lesson: And Jesus "*told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places, saying to them: When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, Give place to this man, and then you begin with shame to take the lowest*

*place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, Friend, go up higher. Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Luke 14:7-11).

Those whose hearts have grown dull might interpret this parable as a simple lesson in humility, good judgement, and table manners. On the surface, to those whose ears can barely hear and who have closed their eyes, it may appear that Jesus had simply noticed the way in which the prideful Pharisees anxiously fought for the best seats, and that He told this story for no greater reason than to help them see the foolishness of their behavior by considering its consequences. As Jesus pointed out, the prideful fool who scrambles for the best seat at the table may very well end up humiliated, if they're forced to give up that coveted seat to a more honorable guest. The obvious lesson would be summed up in Jesus' saying, *“whoever exalts himself will be humbled; and he who humbles himself will be exalted,”* or in other words, the result of foolish pride is dishonor, while the reward of humility is honor.

This simple lesson in the danger associated with pride, and the blessings that spring from humility is clear enough for anyone to understand, but parables also contain profound spiritual lessons that Jesus intends to communicate only to those who have ears to hear. He said, *“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”* So, this parable is not simply a lesson in humility, good judgement, and table manners. Instead, to those whose hearts are open to receiving the *secrets of the kingdom of heaven*, this parable is a lesson in perfection.

This lesson in perfection, a lesson in how to fully live and truly love like a child of God, is found in this parable in Jesus' command to go down lower. Our Lord said, *“When you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, Friend, go up higher”* (Luke 14:10). Jesus tells those who have ears to hear: Choose to go down lower, so that you may be invited to go up higher. This is His command, and the perfect example He sets for us. Our *Lord and God* (John 20:28) never chose the best seat at the table, but instead, the One True God who *“heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain”* (1 Kings 8:27) chose

the lowest place, He chose to become a baby in Mary's womb. The One True God who made "*all things*" and upholds "*all things*" by His Word (John 1:3; Hebrews 1:3) didn't choose to be born in a palace, but in the lowest place, a stable, and laid in a feed trough. The Savior of the World didn't choose to live among the wealthy and the elite, but among the poor, the forgotten, and the outcast. At the Last Supper, Jesus didn't choose the best seat, He chose to be a servant. He rose up after dinner, "*and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet...*" (John 13:4-5). Even in death, our Lord didn't choose the best place, to die peacefully surrounded by family and friends. Instead, for us, and for our Salvation, He endured the shame, humiliation, and excruciatingly painful death of the Cross.

The only-begotten Son of God chose to go down lower. In the words of Holy Scripture, He "*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.*" He chose to go down lower, but so often we struggle to follow His perfect example. Like James and John, we ask for the best seats: Lord, "*grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory*" (Mark 10:37), but Jesus says no, that's not mine to give... "*The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord*" (Matthew 10:24-25). Jesus emptied Himself. He came in humility, and therefore if our desire is to imitate our Master, and to follow our Lord, then we must choose to go down lower, so that we may hear His invitation: "*Friend, go up higher.*"

Our Lord and Savior freely chose the lowest place, *death on a cross*, and "*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 2:7-11). The command to go down lower is an invitation to go up higher, and yet, because our Lord conveyed this *secret of the kingdom of heaven* through a parable, those with dull hearts, whose ears can barely hear and who have closed their eyes, will not understand this truth, but by the grace of God may we. May we hear, and receive the profound spiritual lesson that a call to the lowest place,

a call to *take up your cross daily* (Luke 9:23), is a call to the glory of the kingdom of heaven.