

“Grace filled lives” Luke 14:1, 7-14

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “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. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

Interesting Gospel reading we have for our meditations today. On one hand it seems really familiar, but on the other hand, what is it saying to us? What does it mean for us today? Does it teach anything useful?

Probably this text teaches us many things, but I would suggest that today we would focus only on one of them. What is this one? The connection, or relation between what we believe and how we live.

We could say – how our Christian faith, and how God’s grace shapes our lives. Our beliefs and the way we lead our lives are like two sides of the same coin. Let’s take a look at our today’s text to see how it helps us to reflect on this issue.

Jesus was invited to the house of a ruler of the Pharisees and He was observing how guests chose their places. Then He gave this tip: “When you are invited ... do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished ... be invited ... 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.”

It is easy to picture such situation. Imagine that you would come and sit in the place of honor, and then before everyone’s eyes you are asked to move back, to give place to someone else more honorable. That would be embarrassing. I guess that’s why we tend to sit further back. Just to be safe.

Jesus speaks in this situation, where at least some of those who were present tried to elevate themselves, by taking the places of honor. Now we need to ask the question – why would someone do that?

Why would someone try to elevate themselves above others? Two obvious reasons come to mind. They are arrogance and insecurity. And they both are actually very close relatives. How does it work?

Remember, the way people behave has to do with what they believe. More specifically, what they believe about themselves – who are we as human beings and what makes us special, or significant?

What would you say, what do people often believe, what makes them special and significant? I think the most popular answers probably would be that it is either something that we have, or something that we have achieved.

If that is what we believe, that will determine how we live. For sure, then we will want by all means to achieve and obtain those things that will make us significant, or even better – more significant than others.

And if we succeed, if we are wealthy, or if we are famous, sure we must be more significant than others. Then we must be someone really special, we must be better than others, more worthy, more important than others, for, see – what I have achieved... and then it means that I deserve to sit in place of honor.

But insecurity is not far away either. For if this is what someone believes about us as human being, that our success, and fame and riches will give us values and significance, then who are we without those things? Nothing and nobody. Then we need by all means to elevate ourselves above others just to be worthy.

Probably you have met both these types of people. Those who think of themselves as being better than others, and it often shows in their attitudes, and also those who by all means try to show to everyone how special they are, thus often embarrassing themselves.

And both these behaviors come from the belief that our worth and significance are determined either by what we have or by what we have achieved. But we also need to remember, that both of these types dwell also in ... yes, in each one of us.

These beliefs are so widespread in our society and none of us is completely free from them, and inevitably they influence us as well. I have to confess that big part of me still believes that if only I had more wealth, I would feel better about myself, that I would be something more...

Now this is what Jesus observed in the house of this ruler. But what would be our Christian alternative? What do we believe, or what our gracious God teaches us and how should that shape our behavior?

I would say that what our God reveals and what we as Christians are to believe, and often fail, is something that would make us confident and humble at the same time. If only we allowed the Holy Spirit to persuade us. For He speaks so highly of us as human beings. As created in the image and likeness of the Triune God, to be His own co-workers and to continue His work of filling and ordering this

world and taking care of creations. He speaks of us as having infinite [!] worth and dignity that is derived not from ourselves, but from our Creator, from the Almighty God. And no one can take that away from you. No one!

But even more, the Spirit speaks about us as Jesus' brothers and sisters. What does that mean? That through Jesus we are made true members of His divine family. That we are made heirs of God's Kingdom, and co-heirs with Jesus.

I know that sounds big, but this is what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us, and we can be assured that our God keeps His promised. Of course, for now we still live in this land and age as strangers.

But the heirs of a king, even if they live in a strange land, or in exile, they are no less heirs of his kingdom. When the time comes, when the Kingdom of God is revealed, each one will receive what God the Father has prepared for them.

Jackals (you know those little predators) may want to elevate themselves, to show that they are as important as lions are. They may want to climb up high, or to make a noise just to show how significant they are. Lions don't need that.

They know who they are – lions, and that is enough. Jesus is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5:5), and we are His brothers and sisters. He is the Lion who has triumphed over every enemy. He is the Lion to whom all authority has been given in heavens and on earth.

When Jesus came and dwelt among us, He didn't need to elevate Himself. He knew who He was. That allowed Him to be confident and humble at the same time. And by God's grace you are His brothers and sisters. This is what Jesus tells you. And you know what it makes you...

This is what the Holy Spirit assures you about. This is what we believe. And this belief enables us to be confident without being arrogant, and humble without being insecure. For our confidence and humility comes from our gracious God, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” who happens to be our Brother.

Then Jesus gave one more good tip, about how to choose guests for our celebrations. And again, our reading helps us to consider how what we believe about ourselves determines how we live and relate to others.

That was a common practice back then and it is a common practice in our society as well, that we invite to our social gatherings people who may be beneficial for us. In one way or another. Today we call it networking.

Building our networks of useful people. And... there is nothing wrong with that. And there is also nothing wrong with inviting our friends or relatives to our celebrations and enjoying their company. That's not what Jesus is criticizing.

And most likely Jesus isn't suggesting that occasionally we need to put on rich feasts for those who struggle with poverty. For what good would that do for them? How helpful would such occasional generosity be? Not much...

What Jesus is critically saying is that often we can be very generous towards those from whom we benefit, in one way or another. Towards our people. Then we are happy to through exclusive parties not worrying about the costs. It is easy to give in such situations, no stinginess.

And our attitude often changes radically when we are asked to support someone who does not belong to our people. Someone who can't be beneficial for us. Or when we are asked to support the proclamation of the Gospel. That's why Jesus was suggesting: "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

Why is the first one so easy, and the second one so difficult? Again, it depends on what we believe about ourselves. If we believe that we have achieved and earned what we have, that it belongs to us and us alone...

... that our future and security is in our hands, and it depends on the network of useful people, then it makes perfect sense to gather as much as possible for yourself, to use everything to build additional security, investing in people that may help you, and being careful with not wasting anything where there are no clear benefits. It makes sense...

What we believe determines how we live. What would be our Christian alternative? Do Christians believe and live differently? Statistically speaking, yes, in average Christians are more generous givers than non-Christians.

That's a fact. But why? Because the Holy Spirit reveals to us a very different view of reality. A beautiful one, and this view gives us freedom to be generous with everything that is entrusted to us.

Our God speaks to us and reveals that He is the Creator of everything and that everything belongs to Him. As Psalmist says, that's Him who opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living being. He knows what we need.

Even before we ask for it. He is the one who provides our daily bread. Provides abundantly. But there is much more than that. He is not only our God and generous Creator, but He is also our Father in heaven.

Not only our daily bread, but every day of our lives are in His hand. As Psalmist wrote: "In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." (Ps 139:16)

When we know this, when the Holy Spirit assures us that this is true, this knowledge then frees us from fear about our future. It is always uncertain, and we never know what will happen tomorrow.

That's why we try to build our safety systems. But to know that every day of your life is in the hands of our gracious Father, that He loves and enjoys caring for us, for your needs, that knowledge frees us to be generous not only when we can see some benefits, but especially when we can't.

For our Father knows what we do. He sees our hearts. And He loves us even when we fail Him and embarrass Him. But how much joy it brings to fathers when they see their children taking their teaching seriously.

How much joy we can bring to our Father and to Jesus when we act taking seriously His teaching. And who wouldn't want to bring as much joy as possible to our Father in heaven, by whose grace we live every day.

What we believe shapes how we live. If we believe that our gracious Father cares for us, knows what we do and what we need, that He Himself provides for us and that our future is safe in His hands, it opens our hearts to be truly generous.

Concluding just one more thing. Did you notice the last words of Jesus from our today's reading? "For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." It is not about our salvation. That is yours already through Jesus.

But there is more good news for those who long to lead God-pleasing lives. He knows your heart, He knows your motivation, He knows what you do, and even if no one else notices it, even if no one says "thank you" for the good that you have done in secret, your Father knows it and remembers it.

That thought alone would be enough, but He adds His promise: "My child, I will repay you, I will reward you, when you receive the Kingdom that I have prepared for you from before the foundation of the world." That's how our gracious God treats us, His chosen people.

From Him we keep receiving grace upon grace. May this grace that we keep receiving, fill our lives, and flow over to be a blessing for many. Amen.