

The Pharisees invite Jesus to a meal on the Sabbath and they were watching him closely. That's the kind of scrutiny you don't want to have! There's some violence going on in that little unholy gathering. A little like a den of foxes inviting a hen to come and eat with them. Jesus responds by telling a parable, that ends with a moral, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

I love parables; there can be so many layers of meaning. Some authors have even suggested that we do not so much interpret parables as much as they interpret us. How we interpret something tells a lot about how we see things. And I'm always interested to hear how others understand things differently than myself... We can all learn something from each other...

Parables are an invitation to wrestle with questions and meaning. I think that's one of the beautiful things about parables. For me, the journey of faith is as much about asking questions as it is about finding answers. And parables continuously invite us into more and more questions; more and more layers of meaning.

This morning I'd like to tell a couple of personal stories, then do some reflecting with this whole idea of exalted and humbled. What is that all about?

Many years ago, when I was an administrator, I served on a board of directors for a nonprofit day habilitation program. At the time they were innovative and the executive director was kind of a character in the mid-way area of St Paul. He was well connected in the community.

Other board members were doctors, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, politicians, and other respected leaders in the field. I was all of 28 years old and hob-nobbing with St Paul's movers and shakers, at least that's what I thought...

Every board meeting was extremely formal... We were all made to feel so important. There were engraved name plates and specific sitting placements. The executive director and chairperson would set the agenda and run the meeting; and they were always long-winded affairs.

People loved to pontificate... And I better confess right now, I was right there in the middle of it with all of them. Every meeting seemed like a competition. We would try to impress everyone with what we knew, all the latest and greatest trends in human services...

We all loved to hear ourselves talk. And we often talked about other people. We all knew who was doing what... We knew who were leading the "good programs," and who were leading the "bad programs..."

All that self-righteousness was intoxicating. I remember going out with my own friends and dropping the names of the other board members, like I was big shot... Truth is, in hind sight, I don't think we were really big shots at all. We all just *pretended* to be so high and mighty and righteous.

Truth is, I'm not so sure we really cared about the people or the effectiveness of the program as much as we cared about exalting our own egos. We all wanted to be more important than someone else, and often at the expense of others. There

was a subtle, but very real violence that happened in those unholy meetings. In the competition to be exalted, real people were mocked and ridiculed...

Perhaps you've experienced this in some way. It happens at parties, it happens where you work, it happens in schools, and unfortunately it even happens in church... Whenever we gather and talk about other people, we tend to exalt ourselves at the expense of others. It's not a nice thing to do. And it has real consequences. It can lead to bullying, and sometimes even worse.

We like to say that sticks and stone may break my bones but names will never hurt me. Unfortunately, this is absolutely wrong! Names hurt people all the time. In fact, I learned a new word this week, Cyberbullicide... It means suicide due to social media, online bullying, name calling and belittling.

Jesus is invited to eat with the Pharisee's, and they were watching him closely... Imagine their conversation after he leaves. Foxes inviting the hen to dine with them, Jesus has courage, I'll tell you that!

Another story... I've loved being involved with the community meals. Both in Cannon and Red Wing. And not because of feeling good because of serving someone. But because of the conversations with the people who show up. I always feel blessed to hear their stories.

I remember talking with a person who put together a display of antiques at the Shepherd's center, when I was there many years ago—it was wonderful. It was fun to talk with him and reminisce about the past.

I remember another meal, and a particular gathering around a table, there was one person who had trouble talking. But all the others would speak on his behalf, advocating for him. Letting us know what he needed. I was so touched by how they were taking care of each other, looking out for each other...

I remember talking with a woman who was a master gardener. She was able to give me some tips about my vegetable garden.

I remember talking with an older gentleman who was an entrepreneur of sorts... He had designed a better wheel chair, in fact I saw pictures and he might be on to something...

I remember talking with someone who others might think was mentally ill, and was inspired by his passion to do the right thing.

Behind every single person is a story. People are always more than what they appear to be, or what we judge them to be.

Perhaps there's an invitation for transformation in our gospel lesson. Instead of using judgment to separate people, perhaps we can use judgment to see how God is working in the lives of our neighbors. The transformation is one of looking at ourselves in a mirror and asking, what is it about me that build walls between myself and others?

Believe me, there are all kind of good spiritual practices: reading the bible, praying, meditating... And these are all good and important things to do; undoubtedly, they will reveal to you a lot about yourself. But loving God and

loving the neighbor might be the most significant spiritual practice you can engage in.

Loving God and loving the neighbor moves you away from self-interest and toward compassion for others. Moves you toward being a loving, kind and gracious person. And that's the ultimate litmus test for all Christianity. They will know we are Christians by our love...

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is inviting the religious people to pay attention to what kind of people they are. Religion that judges and builds barriers between people is not about building relationships with God, perhaps it's about feeding big egos, rather than feeding the people. It's really that simple. Religion can be so good; religion can also be so bad...

When Jesus says pick up your cross and follow me, it's about investing in the lives of others and thereby creating an abundant life for ourselves in all the meaning and purpose we experience. Those who are exalted will be humbled, and those who are humbled will be exalted.

As I've grown older, and it's certainly true for many wiser adults I visit, living in any hierarchy of importance just doesn't matter anymore. It's not about who is important and who's not, it's all about belonging. The exalted are humbled and the humbled are exalted. It's not one or the other, it's both / and.

Every time we love God and love the neighbor, we are humbled and exalted and both at the same time. This fits a spiritual pattern that is rooted in the truth of the cross.

We are humbled in confession and exalted in forgiveness... We are humbled under the law and exalted by grace... We are humbled by death and exalted in resurrection. This pattern of humbling and exalting creates loving hearts.

When we see each other as lovable creation in the same way God sees us, we begin to see our neighbors in new and life-giving ways. God is not about building barriers; God is about breaking down barriers that separate us, one from another.

God is continually finding ways to connect us... And after all, we are all in the Body of Christ. And indeed, this is pure miracle, and we give witness to it all the time. The body of Christ is whole and complete when we all belong.

Amen...

There is a big Welch potluck picnic on Saturday, it's not just for church people, it's for everyone. Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, you name it, probably some people who don't go to church... We are all neighbors, this is where we live, we're all connected somehow, we all belong to each other... The picnic is a celebration of each other and our community. This is who we are and what we do...

Amen...