

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the One who invites us to the banquet, Our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Have you ever played the game chutes and ladders? It's an easy game designed for very young children, so the rules are few and simple. Spin the spinner and move your board piece the required number of spaces. If you land at the foot of a ladder you get to move ahead several more spaces than you deserved according to the spin you received. On the other hand, if you land at the top of a chute or a slide, you go down or backward to the bottom of the chute. Why talk about Chutes and Ladders? This game by Milton Bradley can help give us some insight into the culture in which Jesus lived. The people were very caught up in shame and honor. This basically means people's behavior was molded by two things: the fear of being publicly shamed or their desire for being publicly honored. To be shamed was a terrible setback and to be honored moved you forward in the eyes of everyone who mattered to you most.

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning, Jesus is at a dinner party, and He is watching how the guests are picking the best seats for themselves. In a sense, it's a lot like chutes and ladders or a junior high cafeteria where everyone is jockeying for a seat at the "cool" table. Jesus observed the guests at this banquet jockeying for the best reclining seats in the house and offers some sage advice for those vying for the best seats. Just like in Chutes and Ladders you might slide down and

backwards just when you thought you were at the top of the pack or, if you're behind the crowd you might be given a leg up on the competition when the host asks you to move to the front table.

Being honored by your host is one thing, but shameless pride and self-promotion is quite another... That's what Jesus was observing and commenting on. I wonder why it seems to bother Jesus so much? I think it has something to do with human pride, our huge egos, and wanting to be like God. These inherited marks of our sinful nature have been crippling the human race ever since the Garden of Eden. Humans think more of ourselves than reality warrants. We all want to be masters of our own destiny and rebel against any and all forces that try to constrain our wanton desires. It's called human nature or more correctly, our sinful human nature...

Here's what I'm talking about. I know we all try to refrain from judging others, but how many of us think to ourselves, "that one did the unforgivable, he or she is unredeemable and deplorable"? I know I do it. Just last month when a lunatic went on a killing spree in Dayton, I thought to myself, "hell just gained another soul..." In thinking those thoughts, I put myself at the head table in the Kingdom of God. I put myself into the judge's seat reserved only for Jesus Christ. Every time I catch myself trying to act like God, I repent and ask for forgiveness. Trouble is, I don't always catch myself until it's too late and sometimes I've said

or done something that can't be taken back. When we try to put ourselves in a position where we're giving advice to Jesus or we know only we know best, maybe it's time to slide backwards down one of the chutes or slides and humble ourselves.

In a culture of confrontation, and a country that has lost its civility, the church should be the one place where people know how to treat each other with respect and honor. So, to help us along, here comes Mr. Manners, Jesus Christ. We see him here giving seating instructions at a dinner party. His advice helps the guests not only to avoid humiliation, but to practice humility, and in the process, snatch some honor for themselves. First, sit at the lowest place (farthest from the host table), he recommends, so that you might be exalted and honored - rather than seeking the highest place and risk being moved for someone more important. The moral of the story here is, "Don't honor yourself more than others do."

Jesus summarizes his etiquette advice in this way, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). It's the overstuffed ego, the too-big-for-the-britches self-image, the "I am better, I deserve it," the this-is-mine-and-I-am-going-to-take-it attitude that rubs Mr. Manners the wrong way. Remember where he is, and who he's with, when he made these comments. Jesus is in a crowd of Pharisees, of good, upstanding, religious men, of saintly, holy folks who jostle and elbow their way to the highest place possible. They desire to look good in the eyes of men, and in their own eyes

too. They do more than aspire to a seat of honor, they seize it - because it is a place of respect, a place of power, a spot from where one makes judgments of others, and of one's self. The fault in this logic is this; if one can't correctly judge one's own place in the order of the world, how can one be expected to properly judge others?

Jesus' advice is very pragmatic: You want to be honored? This is how to do it. There are certain behaviors, he notes, that can at the very least, give the appearance of humility. Unfortunately, the person who seeks the obscure seat in the hope of being elevated to a prominent one is just as proud as those who seek the best seat to begin with. Humility, then, doesn't have anything to do with one's actual position in the world. A humble CEO is just as holy as a humble farmer and vice versa.

There's an ancient story from the back country of Egypt in the 3rd century about a certain holy Christian, known by all to live a saintly life. One day he was seen walking, carrying a large sack over his shoulder. The sack had a tear in the bottom corner through which grains of sand spilt out as he walked. When asked why he allowed the sand to spill, this humble holy man replied, "Those are my sins which trail out behind me in life." The story is meant to teach that the humble and holy are those who are aware, not of their good deeds, but of their glaring weaknesses. In Saint Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians he told about three times

asking God to remove the thorn in his flesh and God answering that His Grace is sufficient for power is made perfect in weakness. When God uses the weak, broken, and yes, even sinful people like you and me to do great things, it proves to the world it wasn't us, but God inspiring, creating and accomplishing His will in and through us. For that to happen God needs humble people willing to let go of the credit and give praise and honor to God. Jesus once said not to pay so much attention to the outside of the cup - pay more attention to the inside. It's the insides that matter to God. How we really are on the inside always comes out, it spills out behind us like sand leaking from a bag with a hole in the bottom.

So, Jesus wasn't only observing and commenting on proper dinner-party seating arrangements and guest behavior while dining with the Pharisees. This wasn't mere etiquette. It isn't even a life size version of Chutes and Ladders, where dinner guests climb up to a better position or are pushed down the chute to the lowest position. Jesus is laying out one very important characteristic of what it means to follow him. He is teaching us how to be humble. He's giving us a glimpse of how society works under the Kingdom of God.

A little humility goes a long way in heaven, and on earth. Exactly what are we talking about when we say humility? According to the dictionary, humility is not being proud or haughty; not being arrogant or assertive; but rather having a spirit of deference or submission. Humility is a realistic estimation of one's self;

it's not having a poor self-image or thinking you are a worthless wimp. It's simply having an honest evaluation of who you are. True humility is revealed by how we treat others... It's is not some kind of badge we wear. The only way to reveal our humility is if we treat others more highly than yourself. We respect and honor others more than we think of ourselves. If all these active shooters would stop for one minute and put other people higher than themselves the shootings would cease in a heartbeat.

There's no better example of humility than Jesus. He humbled Himself to become one of us—a human being. Think about it; Jesus, the very Son of God humbled Himself on the cross for all of us. He is THE example of being humble. Here's the Good News, we can start living under the culture of God's Kingdom right here, right now, rather than a kingdom ruled by either mankind or the devil, which ever, you choose... Jesus is showing the contrast between how "The World" culture of pride and greed corrupts, whereas, under the Kingdom of God there will be peace and our strength will be made whole in weakness through God's Grace.

May we always put others ahead of ourselves. May sinful pride be forever drowned with the old Adam and Eve in the waters of Baptism. May you have nothing but ladders in your life's path, lifting you by God's grace all the way to the highest, most respected seat reserved especially for you in heaven. Amen.