17th Sunday after Trinity
Bessemer - 1958
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Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 14: 8ff When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honorable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place... For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

## WHEN YOU LOOK FOR YOUR PLACE-CARD!

When, in the words of the famous spiritual, the roll is called up yonder and you find yourself in the great banquet-hall of divine bless - where do you expect to find your place-card? The Divine Host, the all-knowing and all-seeing God, will check the list of guests and arrange the seating. If by His grace you are among them, where will you start looking for your place? Will you congratulate yourself and say that most likely your name is up there at the head table, and so begin to edge up to the center; or will you start looking down at the foot somewhere? If you start down at the foot, you will run into some rather interesting people. Paul will be elbowing his way to find the place for sinners of whom he said he was the chief. Peter, the man who denied his Lord, will be down there overjoyed to find his name there at all. John the Baptist, who did not count himself worthy to unloose the sandals of his Host, will be there too. And Isaiah will be there, the man who wept over his unclean lips!

Where at the table the Lord will have put your card only He knows. But it is tremendously important to know where you intend to start looking. Nor is it likely that you will change your habits much at the last great dinner, the heavenly banquet of the bridegroom. If you have been blundering around the head tables your whole life through, you will probably be the same conceited, arrogant figure at the end too. If during your lifetime you have been sneering at your drunken neighbor, or if you have whispered about your stupid associates, or looked down your nose at the less prosperous, the less disciplined, the less intelligent and the less ambitious, you will probably strut your smug self right into heaven and be brought up with a most embarrassing jolt as with a blushing countenance you are directed to make your way down toward the celestial kitchens to eat with the cooks.

The point is - before God who knows all - how praiseworthy have been your achievements? How honorable, sincere, unselfish, kind, pure and patient have

been your motives? If He is to award you precisely what you deserve, no more and no less, where do you have a right to find your place-card?

Sunday after Sunday we come into the presence of God on the platform of confession. In the prayers of the service we say: Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed. But - and note this well - we did not go on to say: But despite this fact, we are better than many people who are unlearned, ignorant, dishonest, unreasonable and mean, and therefore should merit Thy more distinguished treatment. - That is not what we said We continued: We flee for refuge to Thine infinite mercy... We said in effect that if God by grace could give us a place at the table at all, we would have reason to praise Him forever.

We human beings tend so often toward a false sense of our own worth and importance. This is true of the pastor as well as his people. Somehow we come to think that our station in life, our talents, and our sacrifices are all achievements which we ourselves have attained - for which we can claim the credit. The emphasis so repeatedly is on the I. Like the Pharisee in Christ's parable we come before the Almighty with the boast of self-pride: Lord, look what I'VE done. Look at the position I hold in Your Church. I'm the pastor, a man who has given everything he has - all of his talents and abilities - into Your service, for the spreading of Your Kingdom. I'm the president of the congregation, the president of the ladies society, a Sunday School teacher -- Just look at me, Lord, and what I'm doing. I've made big sacrifices for You! I've given much! Surely, You must acknowledge me and give me a place at the head table in your celestial banquet! We become so taken up with the roar of our own self-esteem that we fail to hear the voice of Jesus as it echoes and re-echoes down through the Centuries: If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself.

Self-denial -- there is the key to real greatness! There is the key to real worth! The question for us is, not how we can destroy ourselves, but how can

we perfect ourselves. How can we open up and become fully what our Maker intended us to be. And only by the hard road of Self-denial can we become really complete. For only as I see myself as nothing is it possible for God to become everything for me. And herein is God glorified. The Glory of God does not consist in receiving something from us which will make Him richer! It consists rather in giving us the means of being no longer nothing. The Glory of God is not made up of our offerings but of His gifts. The glory of the sun is nothing else than to enlighten the darkness, to melt the snow, and to ripen the grain. The glory of the storm is to pass on its fury to the land and sea. And the Glory of God is to make all things divine by imparting to them being and grace and life through Him Who became Man for us and for our salvation. That God should take this clump of ground - this clod of clay - and by His Spirit breathe into my nostrils the breath of Life - therein is His Glory. My greatness consists not in what I do, but what God does through me as He lives in me, and moves in me, and has His Being in me. What people must see in me is nothing other than the Christ in me as I go about in this benighted world showing forth the praises of Him who has called me out of darkness into His marvelous Light. Herein is God Glorified! Not to give glory to God, then is to refuse Him admittance into myself. It is to barricade myself in selfishness, and like the darkness, to refuse to understand the light.

God made us for His Glory and that makes us infinitely important - that gives us infinite worth! Of all the books in the world, the Bible makes the greatest case for your individual importance. God took personal delight in designing and manufacturing you. In Christ, He went to His death to redeem you. And, ceaselessly, through the Holy Spirit's work in Word and Sacrament, He is at work to remake you into a prince fit for celestial company.

But - and this is what we so often tend to forget - He has done the same for the pygmies in Africa, for the misguided and twisted minds of atheistic societies, for the demented patient in a padded cell and for the murderer in the prison. The fact that you have perhaps brains enough to hold a position of prominence,

health enough to work, personal charm to make friends, families to help and to love you, and citizenship in a land of freedom and opportunity - these things have absolutely no bearing on your place card at the table of God. The only bearing they have at all is the compelling command to gratitude - that we might see everything we have as the gracious gift of God and to receive such with thanksgiving. If such fortunate aspects in our lives lead us to strut in pride instead of bowing our hearts in humble thanksgiving, God would serve us better by taking away all the props from our lives - if thereby He could send us scurrying down to the foot of the table to shout a Hallelujah at finding our names there at all.

An ancient rubric in the confessional service before Holy Communion contains the cry: Thou couldst with perfect justice condemn us for all eternity. If that is true - and it most certainly is; for we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags - then must we not go on to confess that God could with equal justice impose on us lesser misfortunes? Must we not say, God, Thou couldst with perfect justice burn down my house, strike me down with cancer, allow the death of my children, derange my mind, twist my body, and torture my spirit?

Oh, that God would teach us so to pray, if that is the only way we can learn humility and self-denial! Oh, that God would teach us to pray for hardship and calamity, if thereby we might learn with Paul where our real sufficiency lies. If it takes fiery trials and persecution to bring us to our knees in humble submission, then let them come - anything, so long as we might hear the gracious, reassuring Voice of God saying to us: My Grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. It takes a man completely emptied of self and filled entirely with the Grace of God to be able to say: Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions in distresses For Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

It is at the foot of the Cross that you can begin to learn what the Grace of God really is. At Calvary, where God Himself brought about your redemption

through blood and sweat and tears, where He endured the pangs and tortures of hell in your stead -- there alone are you brought to real repentance and trust. There you begin to comprehend the overwhelming wonder that in Him you do have a place at the table. It may be at the foot or at the head - what does it matter! What matters is that through Christ's redeeming death and resurrection your place-card is there.

Amen.