17th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1965

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 14: 8ff. When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give place to this man....For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

## WHEN YOU LOOK FOR YOUR PLACE-CARD!

When, in the words of the old spiritual, the roll is called up yonder, and you find yourself in the great banquet-hall of divine bliss — 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-card? Will you congratulate yourself and say that most likely your name is up there at the head table, and so begin to edge your way up to the front; or will you start looking in the rear somewhere? If you start looking in the rear of the hall, you will run into some rather interesting people. St. 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 Baptism, who did not count himself worthy to unloose the sandals of His ~~Hose~~ Lord, 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 place-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 person at the end too - you will probably strut your smug self right into heaven and be brought up with a most embarrassing jolt as with a blushing face you are directed to make your way down toward the celestial kitchens to eat with the cooks

This pride comes at us in a very subtle way. You remember the elder brother in Christ's story of the Prodigal Son? For those many long years while his younger brother was carousing in the far country, he had stayed at home - faithful, loyal, dependable. Now he cannot understand why the whole house should be turned upside down, why there should be celebrating, feasting, and singing - just because it

pleased this irresponsible scamp of a brother to come back home. Surely he deserve a higher and more honored place than his wayward brother.

Those of us who have grown up in the Christian faith have perhaps had similar feelings. After all, it is something when a person faithfully reads his Bible every day of his life, prays every day, and faithfully follows the commandments of God. Surely God must honor and reward us for the sacrifices we have made - especially those of us who are officers, and leaders, & teachers and earnest workers in the church. We have borne the burden and heat of the day. We deserve a more honored place at the celestial banquet table than the late-comers into the Kingdom of God.

The moment we begin to reason like this, we have lost the final amazement that we should be invited to the divine banquet at all. No longer are we impressed by the miracle of the Father's love - that we have been forgiven, redeemed, restored to sonship - that, lo, these many years we have enjoyed the Father's companionship and the security of the Father's House. How broad is this love of the Father! It spans the whole scale of human possibilities. And the wonder of it is that even you and I, with all our peculiarities, have a place in that heart and are safe there. The danger is always that we take the Father's love for granted - that we begin to think we have deserved His favor. From childhood many of us have heard that there is a loving God. We have become so accustomed to hearing about forgiveness and the Lord's atoning death that it is all taken for granted. It would seem almost rediculous to go up to the Father and say, Father, today I love you quite specially. We do not reflect upon what is as normal and near as the air we breathe. Nor do we give thanks for it. It is the same way with many married couples. They are accustomed to each other. It would not occur to them to express in words what they mean to each other. Each is hardly aware of what the other means until he or she has gone on a journey or one is left alone at an open grave... Actually, it can be the death of our faith if we forget that it is literally a miracle, a gift, an absolutely-not-to-be-taken-for-granted fact that we are able to say, Abba, Father and My Lord and my God!

This is surely what the Book of Revelation means when it speaks about losing the first love. The charm of this first love is that it has not yet become habit and second nature, but comes into our life as an amazing surprise. That there should be someone like Jesus, that He should gain the Father's heart for us, that He should rescue us from the frustration of our personal lives and snatch us away from this horrible vegetating on the edge of the void, that He should invite us to the marriage feast of eternal joy — all this is indeed a tremendous surprise. But one must have cried out from the depths, one must have been at the end of the tether, one must have actually experienced and realized the sinfulness from which he has been forgive before he can comprehend what this love really is.

This is the heart and center of the Gospel. In our lives we may have squandered what we would. Perhaps we have squandered and mismanaged our marriage. We may have squandered away our good reputation. We may have ruined our bodies or our imaginations. Perhaps our thinking has been corroded by envy and the heat of harmful passions. Perhaps we have dragged the faith of our childhood in the gutte All this may be true. But right here comes the great surprise: God has not given me up. He still counts me His child. He tells me that He cannot forget me. When anybody has done as much for me as my Father in heaven has done, when He sacrifice His best Beloved for me, He simply cannot forget me. And therefore I can come to Him. God pays no regard to what I have lost; He thing only of what I am: His unhappy child, standing there at His door again.

But what if this unhappy child is not myself, but some other person? How do I act then? Why is it that outsiders often find it so difficult to get inside the church? Isn't it because only too often we have given the impression that the church is just for respectable people? I wonder how many an honest seeke has not lamented: "It's the respectable people who go to church. But I have led a reckless life; I'm anything but a goody-goody. I have some wild nights behind me and during the day too I've cut some corners in my job. But these respectible sheep, who have never faced the temptations I have, need not think they are any better than I am. And they certainly need not think, 'Ah, he's a latecomer, but

he's coming. How nice that he finally caught on; we knew he'd come around sooner or later.'"

As soon as we have said that, we good people have become infected by the acids of Pharisaism. We know, of course, that God has accepted us through grace alone. But yet we think there must be something rather decent and nice about us that God should have cast an eye upon you and me of all people and drawn us into His fellowship. And quite naturally we look down upon the agnostics who believe nothing; we despise the people who have nothing to hold on to. We are fine fellow God may well congratulate Himself for singling us out of the crowd. He knew what he was getting when he got us. Yes, we are the salt of the earth; we are the Old Guard of the kingdom of God. And those who are on the outside, the earnest seekers, catch these spiritual waves which we emit and they react against them. What is more, in that moment we are suddenly identified with those people in our Lord's parable who go crashing up to the head table as if they had every right to be there. I come first; for after all, God, am I not your old standby!

But wouldn't this be a terrible attitude to take? Don't we see that this just takes us farther away from God - the very people who are the old and perhaps the tried and tested Christians? The moment we think we are just a little bit better than the next fellow, that we deserve more than he does - in that moment our hearts are not beating in tune with the Fathers, our hearts are at odds with the Father's heart. A person who cannot wholeheartedly rejoice with every single last sinner who has been invited the the marriage-feast, a person who himself is not inflamed by the glowing love of Jesus for the erring and the lost and is not impelled to give his life to rescue human souls - that person is alienating himself from God in a very subtle but dreadful way, no matter how consciously and determinedly he continues to call himself a Christian, even though he prays and reads the Bible and goes to church.

What a wretched thing it is to call oneself a Christian and yet be a proud and conceited servant in the Father's house. And what a glorious thing it

is to become aware every day anew of the miracle that there is Someone who hears us - Someone who is waiting for us - Someone who wonderfully sets everything right and finds a way out for us when all we can do is to wear ourselves out with worry - Someone who one day, when our last hour comes, will be waiting for us on the steps of the eternal banquet hall and will lead us to the place where we may speak with Jesus forever and ever and where we shall be surrounded by that joy which here we have only begun to taste. The great thing is that we do have a place at His table. It may be at the foot or at the head - what does it matter. What matters is that our place-card is there. Amen.