

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Feast of Grace

Luke 14:7-14

August 31, 2025

In today's gospel reading, Jesus launches into a parable in the presence of a group of people who are trying to make sense of him, and they're not sure about him at all. A parable is a short story told to illustrate usually just one point. It has one message, though with some parables, you have to ponder them to come clear to the intended meaning. Not so with this one. Not really. The message of this little parable is clear, because he tells us what it is. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted." Let's call it the parable of humility.

The story about humility is set at a wedding feast. Any time you see a wedding in scripture, you are seeing an image of the kingdom of God. Weddings, wedding feasts, banquets, vineyards--these are all scriptural symbols of the kingdom of God—God's dream for our life with God, with one another, and for all creation. They are signs full of joy, abundance, festivity, delight, love. Music and dancing, food and drink, love and renewal of love. These are all signs of the kingdom. Remember when Jesus turned water into wine—at a wedding. Remember reading Song of Solomon—the grand poem of a wedding feast. Remember the scene in Revelation 19-- the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, one of the most hope-filled and evocative in all of scripture, picturing the union of the Lamb, Christ, with the bride, the Church.

Hear the passage from Revelation:

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready. . .

⁹Then the angel said to me, "Write this:

Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"

And he added, "These are the true words of God."

When Jesus tells a parable that begins, "You are invited to a wedding banquet...", you know the stakes are as high as the kingdom. He begins it, "WHEN you're invited to a wedding banquet..." And he's not just giving advice about how to handle a high-stakes social situation. He's starting what could be a Flannery O Conner story: picture a grand celebration. This is like the kingdom of God. Now picture yourself in it. How are you going to be, and who are you going to be with?

Here's the picture he proposes: When you are invited to a wedding banquet---when you're invited into the scene of the kingdom of God, don't go seeking the place of honor, but sit at the lowest place. Instead of seeking the high place, seek the lower place, and just maybe, the host will come get you and bring you up higher. Be humble.

This is a core principle in Christian life, this principle of going lower, and we're reminded of it. In case we have ever forgotten, we are reminded of it by our baptisms. The very first thing that happens to you in your public lifewith Christ is you are lowered down. Down into the water. Your first move is downward. This move is highly symbolic.

In the first place, it's symbolic of the death of Jesus Christ. As he died and was buried in the tomb, so we are buried with him. Baptism reenacts this. Our spiritual path follows his. We are told to take up our cross. We are told to lose our lives and die to self. So, in baptism, those who have taken their cross, those who have given their lives to Christ, are first lowered down.

This lowering is a movement of humility, but it is not a movement of shame. There's a very important difference between the two. Shame is the feeling that you are unworthy of love or beyond mercy. It comes up from within us, or it's received by the message that someone else gives us. It is this feeling of utter unworthiness that you simply cannot withstand the judgment of this thing that you have done or this person you have come to believe yourself to be. Whatever this is, it is not the gospel. The gospel begins with humbleness, not with shame. The gospel answers our sins and our trespasses, even the worst of them, with forgiveness from a loving God who desires reconciliation and restitution and reconstitution from brokenness.

The gospel is lived in the humility which confesses, as we all must, I am a sinner in need of forgiveness, I am a lamb in need of a good shepherd. I am a child who can go prodigal. I am a guest at a wedding feast, to which I have no right on my own. I am here only by grace.

Grace is my invitation; grace is my entry. Grace is the air I breathe. I am a child of grace. And so is every single other person at this feast. We are to picture ourselves in the parable's picture of an abundant feast: no one is there on their own merit. Everyone is there by grace.

This is humility, not shame. Humility is rooted in guilt and confession and the seeking of forgiveness but also in gratitude. And so is the Christian life. Gratitude is at the heart of it all. It all begins from there and returns there each occasion we celebrate the Lord's supper, the eucharistic meal. Eucharist means thanksgiving. As Americans we may celebrate Thanksgiving Day once day a year, but at the heart of Christian worship and life is the feast of gratitude at the Lord's Table that we share over and over again..

Just so, in baptism, the lowering into the water is not a descent of shame, but a humble movement freely undertaken of gratitude freely offered for the grace of God freely received. It holds me, saves me, and lifts me up. When you are baptized, you are enacting the Christian ritual of humility. It makes you who you are in relationship with God and with one another and with all creation.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are lowered into the sacred water and immersed into God's grace. When we rise from the water to walk with Christ, we are still, and evermore, immersed in God's grace. Those who are lowered shall be raised. Those who die shall live again. Those who humble themselves shall be exalted.

The way up is first the way down. Jesus traveled this path—he humbled himself, emptying himself to death, even death on a cross, that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Jesus travelled this path—and calls us, invites us, leads us, to create a world in which the abundant, generous, lavish, joyful life is extended to all people. You could say that this is the mission of the church in the world—to throw a wedding feast and invite everyone in. The church is to be the people who have caught the vision and been caught up in it. They are the ones who have been so fully immersed in the goodness of God, that they go through their whole lives dripping with mercy and leaving drops of grace in every step they take.

Hebrews puts it in terms of love. After going for 12 chapters about God's sacrificial love for you in Christ, our high priest, Chapter 13 begins with love—love one another—the brothers and sisters in Christ, and love the stranger, the outsider, the other.

In the first two verses of chapter 13, there's "mutual affection" = *philadelphia*—love brothers and sisters, and there's the call to "hospitality" = *phliaxenia*—love strangers. There's *philadelphia* and *philaxenia*, back to back at the beginning of the opening of Hebrews.

Apparently, hospitality of the order that we are called and invited and led to give is wild. When love have been shown to strangers, some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Maybe—I wonder—if one of them was the angel in Revelation 19, telling everyone about the feast. Jesus goes even further in Matthew 25, "When you show love to hungry, thirsty, hurting people, you're doing it to me."

Hebrews is so enraptured with love as the fitting response to Christ, that the only thing were told not to love in Hebrews is money. Love God, love brothers, love sisters, love strangers, love your husband, love your wife, and be free from the love of money. One has to wonder reading this wisdom whether the two objects of love are inversely correlated. The capacity to do one surely has to do with our freedom from the other, right?

Certainly, Jesus prompts generosity of such a radical nature that not only did he turn the tables on his hosts; it's like he came in and flipped them all over. When you give the banquet of life, invite not just your friends to share goodness and joy with you, but people who can't pay you back. In kingdom terms, it's like this: fling wide the doors of your heart: be generous, be lavish, be prodigal, be expansive in all things. Bring other people up, let other people in. Let your humility be grounded in your gratitude. And let your life grow bigger and be raised higher, from a humility that makes room for grace.

It's a way of life embodied in baptism. We're lowered into the water and raised walk in new life in Christ, who is with us and within us. And it's here in this little parable. This little parable teaches something wildly and dramatically important: God's grace is not an earned reward for a cautious life lived anxiously with begrudging kindness, within a closed circle of friends.

Friends, Jesus says, it's so much bigger, and so much better. Come on in, come on all the way in, all the way down, and let me bring you with me all the way up to the very throne of God. And as you come, bring everyone you can with you. Your life will be enriched by their presence with you on the way.

May your heart be tender to see Christ in yourself, for Christ is with you.

May our hearts be wide to see Christ in brother and sister and stranger, for the Lord is with us all.

May our lives sing Hallelujah, let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb of God has begun. Blessed are you, for you are invited.

Come, and receive freely, give your life generously, and rejoice. For the Lord is come and he is good and he is welcoming you home. Amen.