

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost XII

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Give us the strength it takes to listen rather than to judge, to trust rather than to fear, to try again and again to make peace even when peace eludes us. We ask, O God, for the grace to be our best selves. We ask for the vision to be builders of the human community rather than its destroyers. We ask for the humility as a people to understand the fears and hopes of other peoples. Amen.

The pride of place—the pride of knowing that you belong, that you have a seat at the table, and it doesn't matter where you've been or who you are, God has a seat for you at God's banquet table. I used to be a mentor at a juvenile prison in Columbia, SC. This was an honor of a life-time because I had never been one before. I went through a long process before my approval as a mentor of an African-American boy of about fourteen-fifteen years. I was scared the first time I walked into that jail and wondered to myself, what in heaven's name was I getting myself into? The moment I drove through the gate of the prison compound, I felt this sense of being a captive. Surrounding me were barbed wires of every kind in the world. And as I drove to the lobby where I was scheduled to meet my new friend, I saw countless young boys who were inmates at this prison simply wandering around the open fields.

The first meeting with the inmate was more introductory. We sat around a table facing each other and simply talked. I learned so much about him, who he was, his family and the circumstances under which he found himself in prison. That wasn't his first brush with the law nor was it his first time at that particular prison. He's been there a couple of times. I could tell from my interaction with him that at his young age, he's seen more than enough of his share of life. Within me flowed a river of uncontrollable tears. I couldn't believe that a young boy like that could endure so much. We settled on getting together every Friday. And before I departed, he asked that I bring him a burger from McDonalds on my next visit. I asked, which kind do you want? "Big Mac" He responded. From that day, I made it a point to bring him a Big Mac meal from McDonalds every time I visited. He didn't have to remind me. He knew I would bring him a Big Mac. And I knew I had to bring him a Big Mac. The pride of place.

Every visit was filled with trepidation. I felt that in my ignorance I could say something stupid or be judgmental of his reality. Or worse still because we really had nothing in common our time will be filled with the void of silence.

But there was always something to talk about as we sat at the metal round table in the visitor room. We will sit at that table together and I will watch him munch down the Big Mac and fries, and then guzzle down the Coke. It was as if that was the only meal he's had the entire week. I didn't offer him the world, all I offered was something which I believe meant more than the world to him- the opportunity of sitting at a table together, hearing his story, helping him to understand that someone-a stranger values him, and that if the world does judge him for what he's done amiss, I am in no way going to judge him. I am humble enough to recognize my pride of place at the table.

Every moment with him, sitting round that metal table was a moment of immense gratitude and awe. I was gratified and glad that I could spend time with him but I was keenly aware that my place at the round metal table was only guaranteed because he chose to spend time with me. He didn't need me at the table. I was the one who needed him, after all, to love is to have an object of that love. He, was the object of my love, and it was important then to know my place in that relationship.

I always had to be careful not to misinterpret my place at the table, for that table and all tables have no room for pride, they only have a pride of place. In other words, the pride of place is the recognition that you absolutely have a place at the table, and it doesn't matter who you are.

It can be awkward and intimidating to come to the table with someone who seems so different from ourselves and in such dire need. Often, it's more comfortable to assert our difference and distance, by insisting on helping or doing for, than it is to simply share a meal and conversation. In her work on hospitality, Christine Pohl observes, "We are familiar with roles as helpers, but are less certain about being equals eating together. Many of us struggle with simply being with people in need; our helping roles give definition to the relationship but they also keep it decidedly hierarchical." The pride of place rejects any semblance of hierarchy around the table. It simply rejoices in the reality of being there, at the table together as partners.

There's something transformative about sitting at a table together, whether that table is an ornate table in the grand dining room of the White House, the table in your dining room, a round table bolted to the floor in a prison visitation hall, an altar table to which everyone is invited or the metaphorical table where all our voices are welcomed, affirmed and decisions are made with a collective spirit.

Whereas the pride of place upholds your place at the table, it also makes the claim that it doesn't matter who you are, nor does one's status in society is of any relevance at the table-God's banquet table. That welcoming table which is about the hospitality of the humble and the humility of the hospitable.

Talking about God's banquet table, today's gospel story presents an occasion of a marriage feast. At such feasts, those of high social ranking based on age or attainment customarily arrive last. But here was a man who although had some significant social standing, arrived a little early and selected for himself one of the choice seats of honor. As guests arrives, the seats filled up. Then right at the last minute, another person of prestige and importance arrived. The host approached the man who had sat himself on a seat of honor and asked that he vacates his seat for a man of higher importance and to sit at the one seat which was still vacant-the seat with the lowest rank. Jesus concludes the parable with an exhortation to voluntarily take the lowest seat. Do not allow yourself to be forced to take the lowest seat. Take that yourself.

Proverbs has these wise words in honor of the pride of place "Glorify not thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men: for better it is that it be said unto thee, come up hither; than that thou shouldest be put lower in the presence of the prince."

The parable presents us with the appropriate response to the dawning of God's reign-God's wedding feast. At God's feast, carefully contrived rankings and distinctions of honor are undermined and overthrown. Those who depend upon such things as social rank and status to perpetuate their standing and those who carefully cultivate and manipulate that standing will find that matters of rank are turned upside down. God's reign is not for those who claim status at the table, it is for those who have no claim on the existing order, it is for those who cling so desperately to the pride of place and are therefore ordained to be humble.

The parable is not to encourage a kind of humility that seems to suggest that we are unworthy at the table. Rather, the pride of place at the table provides us with a window to see a glimpse of God's reign, and the privilege of such sight is to abandon all pretensions and to realize that those who are considered to be utterly wretched, irreligious, miserable and abandoned have a seat at the table in places of honor, whereas those who were thought to have monopoly on matters of place and prerogative now stand without.

In the parable, Jesus questions society's scheme of honors and reputation "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Even far better, he says, when making out a list of persons to invite for dinner, do not invite those who can reciprocate. Remember my inmate friend? Yes, I didn't offer him the world. Beyond the Big Mac, all I offered was something which I believe meant more than the world to him-the opportunity of sitting at a table together.

It was an act which wasn't meant to garner any reciprocity, for I wasn't supposed to give to him with the hope of receiving something in return. My gift was meant to affirm both our place at God's table and to assure him that God's equal pronouncement upon us comes out of His divine grace alone.

For this reason, we cannot keep account of our merits before God-as if we could accumulate reserves of extra merit that would obligate God to us. The pride of place is made possible by God's grace alone. And any citizen of God's heaven will know that a seat at the table is a mark of God's unprecedented outpouring of grace, and not a mark of attainment.

St. Augustine writes this "I was inflated with self-esteem, which made me think myself a great man." Great you may be, but humble must you be at any table, even the Lord's banquet table. Amen.