

In the King's Presence

Luke 14:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence," we just heard from King Solomon (Proverbs 25:6). And yet look where we are: we're in church. And church is where God our heavenly King has promised to *be*, saying, "where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them" (Matthew 18:20). We began this service in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And God says, "In every place where I cause My name to be remembered I will come to you" (Exodus 20:24). Ergo, God is here, *right here, in this place*. He is here in His Word, as He says at the end of Matthew, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, *I am with you always*" (28:19-20). The apostle Paul writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation in* the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation in* the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). You can't participate in something that's not there. But Christ *is*, He is truly present in with and under the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Why else do you think we dress up for church? Why do you think we stand for the Gospel reading, or kneel for confession and prayer? It's not just to keep you awake, or because we want you to feel as uncomfortable as possible. It's because we believe *God* is here and when you come here you come into the presence of the King. Think of the kind of respect you would show to a judge in his courtroom or to a bride at her wedding. You wouldn't show up in a pair of tattered jeans or stroll in with a cup of Starbucks in your hand. So when we come into the courts of the *Lord*, when we come to partake of the *Lamb's* wedding feast, we dress up, we stand up, we kneel, out of respect for the Lord of all, who is *here*.

Our building reflects this, by the way. We have a beautiful sanctuary, even more so now that the next phase of our renovation is complete, but it's not just about the aesthetics. Everything about this space says, "Here is a special place, an important place, where important things happen." Take the cross, for instance. The cross reminds us of Jesus' victory over sin. The golden Greek letters say, "Jesus Christ conquers," while the blood-red background reminds us of what that victory cost. The stained glass windows tell the story of salvation, from the creation of the world to the anticipation of all believers of Christ's return. The vaulted ceiling gives a sense of grandness, giving us some much needed perspective on our own place in the universe. Even our music and our liturgy are different from what you find out in the world. You may not understand

everything you see or hear, but the main message is clear: This is a place to come and know *God*.

But how dare we come at all! The proverb says, “Do *not* put yourself forward in the king’s presence.” And Jesus says something similar in today’s Gospel: “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, *do not sit down in a place of honor*” (Luke 14:8). Have we not done just that? Even you hiding back there in the shadows? Have we not come into our King’s presence, sitting down in places of honor before Him? What gives us the right? Ought we not to be more like the prophet Isaiah, who upon finding Himself before God in His temple, exclaimed in terror, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” We are men and women of unclean lips, and not our lips only, but also our eyes and our ears. Our thoughts and our desires have been *soiled* with sin. And we live in the midst of a fallen world, which leaves a stain all of its own. We have come into the presence of the King dressed in the filthiest rags imaginable. What does this mean for sinners like us? Are we lost? Have we just invited God’s wrath upon us?

We get the answer in today’s Gospel, where Jesus has gone to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, and behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy, a disease that would have rendered him unclean. And yet, he stands in the King’s presence. Like the sinful woman earlier in Luke, who snuck into a different Pharisees’ house when she learned that Jesus would be there (Luke 7:37), this sinner comes and appears before Jesus, without being summoned. But what does Jesus do? Does He punish him? Tell him to go away? Say, “How dare you come in here and stand in My presence!” No. He has mercy on him. He takes him and heals him and sends him away.

Meanwhile, He tells a parable to those who were invited, when He noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “go and sit in the *lowest* place...for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:10, 11).

Notice, *both* came to Jesus. *Both* presented themselves before the King. But only *one* was exalted: the man who had dropsy. Why? Because even though He came into the King’s presence, he did not *put himself forward*. He did not seek to honor himself but honored *Jesus* by seeking Him for help. The Pharisees came to honor themselves. They chose the places of honor, where they would be seen by others. They put themselves forward in the King’s presence, and were therefore humbled by Him.

So, then, it is not being in the King’s presence that’s the problem, but the reason you’re there. *Why* have you come? What are you *doing* here? If, like the Pharisees, you

have come to exalt yourself, to boast, or to take for yourself what you think you deserve, then you've come for the wrong reason. You have put yourself forward in the King's presence, and you will be humbled. This is why, while we dress up for worship, we do so "in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control" (1 Timothy 2:9-11). This is church, not a fashion show. In another of Jesus' parables, it is the repentant tax collector who went home from church justified, *not* the prideful Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). And one of the reasons we practice Closed Communion is because it is the *Lord's* Supper we eat, not a buffet. Paul writes, "Let a person *examine* himself...and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Examine himself concerning his sin and his need for forgiveness. Examine himself concerning his trust in Jesus' words, that this *is* His Body and His Blood, which *actually delivers* the forgiveness of sins. Examine himself concerning whether he believes and confesses the same things as those at the rail beside him. "For there is one body and one Spirit," and we are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3, 4), not simply agreeing to disagree, which is no unity at all, but submitting to the Word of God in all things. This is what it means to humble yourself. We come to be *healed*, not heralded.

And we are not disappointed. God is here, and to those who seek His help, He does not turn them away. He is not angry with them. He loves them, and He is here *for* them. He says, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:25). We come here spiritually tattered and torn, and Jesus takes those filthy rags and exchanges them for a pure white garment. He dresses us up in His own righteousness, covering all our filth. He picks us up from the lowest place and presents us to Himself in splendor, welcoming us into His kingdom of grace. "Friend," He says, "move up higher. You've come here for help. Here it is. Behold, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And we are sent away, not in shame, but with *purpose*. Having been called to faith by the Gospel, personally escorted from the lowest to the highest place, we aim to walk in a manner *worthy* of that calling, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1-2). With humility, because we didn't earn this place. We didn't get here by our own reason or strength. It was *given* to us, and our merciful King now desires us to show the same kind of mercy to each another. With gentleness, because we're no better than anyone else. Just because we've been invited to move up higher doesn't mean we can treat others with contempt. Rather, we comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). With patience, because we're a family, and sometimes family is the hardest to love. But just as you didn't choose your earthly family, so you've been put here in this place with these people, and they need you, just as you need them. They need you to forgive them, to bear with them through

all the changes and chances of life. You are the Body of Christ. You share the same Head. You have the same hope. And you bow before the same God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in the words of the apostle Peter, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God. Do not put yourself forward in the King's presence, but come into His presence with thanksgiving. For Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He came to save *you*. You were lost and condemned, but He has purchased and won you with His blood. He has seated you with Him in the heavenly places, having humbled Himself to the point of death, in order to prepare a place for you. So do not fear. You are Christ's, and He will shelter you with His presence always.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

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