

AUGUST 31, 2013 BY MSGR. CHARLES POPE

You've Gotta Serve Before You Sit

A Meditation on the Gospel for the 22nd Sunday of the Year



In the Gospel for this weekend's Mass the Lord Jesus summons us to a deeper appreciation for what brings true honor, for what makes a person truly great. As you may imagine, what the world thinks of as great and honorable is rather different than what God thinks and sees. Let's look at this Gospel in three parts and discover its paradoxical vision.

I. THE PERSON who HONORS – The Lord is at a banquet and notices how people vie for seats of honor. He gives the following teaching: *When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor. A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, 'Give your place to this man,' and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place.*

Now what the Lord is really reminding us is, that at formal banquets, it is the host who determines where we sit. This is of course most common in our culture at wedding receptions where seats are determined and assigned by the couple ahead of time. For someone to walk in and sit at the head table reserved for the wedding party is both rude and pompous. The polite and expected thing is to report to the entrance table, and receive a table number and graciously take your seat.

And of course the banquet we are invited to is God's Kingdom. And in that kingdom God has a place for us, but we must be clear that it is *God* who assigns each his place.

Recall that, when a dispute arose among the apostles as to who was the greatest Jesus responded: *I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom* (Luke 22:29).

Another time James and John approached and asked for seats at Jesus right and left (i.e. the places of honor) and Jesus responded: *But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not my to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared* (Mk 10:40).

So, our places in the Kingdom are determined by God.

It is a true fact that many miss this point and like to assign themselves places and honors in God's kingdom. But in the end, that belongs to God. Some go through life resentful that they are not as rich as others, or as powerful, or as advantaged. Others wish they were taller, thinner, prettier, smarter etc. They are jealous of what they see as the advantages of others.

But be very careful here. It is not for us to determine what is best for us. It is not for us to assign our own seat. Just because we think it is better to be rich than poor does not mean this is correct. The Lord warns how difficult it is for the rich to inherit the Kingdom of God. So being rich isn't necessarily the blessing we think it is. It is for God to decide what is best for us. Riches, power, popularity, good looks etc. are all things that tend to root us in the world. These things are not necessarily blessings. Having a "good" job like some one else, a family like someone else, a talent like someone else, may not be what is best for us.

God decides all that and gives us the talents and blessings, as well as burdens and challenges he knows are best. So don't just walk into God's Kingdom and seat yourself! Check in with the host and find His will in terms of your seat. He's got just the right one for you.

II. THE PARADOX of HONORS— Now another thing to note about this Gospel is that Jesus was *noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table*. In effect he is struck at how people perceive honor, and vie for what they think is honor. They want to impress folks and be thought of as important.

But remember, this is God's banquet and the qualifications for the seats of honor are very different from worldly honors. In the world, we are impressed by things like:

bling, brawn, beauty and bucks. We're impressed by big cars, big houses, big hair, and a big entourage. The limo pulls up and watch the eyes turn. Out come the popular, the powerful, the glitterati and game changers. The cameras flash and the applause ensues. We're quite impressed actually. This is what *WE* notice, this is what draws *OUR* eyes.

But what of God? At the banquet of God's kingdom, who draws his eye? As God looks around the banquet hall of the Kingdom who catches his eye? The Lord gives that answer in many places in Scripture:

- 1 Mark 10:43 *Whoever would be great among you must be the servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*
- 2 Luke 22:26 *Rather let the greatest among you become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who do you think is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.*
- 3 Ps 138:6 *Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar.*
- 4 1 Cor 1:27 *But God chose the foolish and low born things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*
- 5 James 2:5 *Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?*
- 6 Luke 13:30 *Many who are last shall be first, and many who are first shall be last.*
- 7 Luke 1:52 *He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

So, back to our question: In the banquet hall of God's Kingdom, who catches his eye? Is it those at the "Head table?" It is those on the red rug and behind the rope line? No. If we apply God's works, those who catch God's eye are not even at the table, but are those who wait on the tables, those who serve, those back in the kitchen cooking and washing dishes! It is the lowly, the humble and the servants of all.

Here is the paradox of honor in God's kingdom: It is not about being powerful in the worldly sense. God is not impressed by the size of our house, car or bank account. Our popularity does not impress him. It is our service, our humility, our love for others that catches his eye. Here are the seats of honor, the places closest to God's heart, they are for those who serve.

You gotta serve before you sit in any place of honor in God's banquet.

III. THE PRESCRIPTION for HONORS – And hence the prescription is clear enough. Jesus instructs us in today’s Gospel: *when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’*

Now what all this adds up to is that if we want to be great in the Kingdom of God then we had better become a servant. Jesus says, take the lowest place. Serve before you sit. What makes you great is to serve. The greatest thing about us is not our paycheck, our fancy house or any of that stuff. What is greatest about us is that we serve.

We are great when we identify with the lowly and humble and seek to serve rather than to be served. We are great when we use our wealth, power, talents and abilities to build up the people of God and extend God’s Kingdom. Even in things which we are paid to do can still be service if serving is the primary reason we do it.

Jesus then adds: *When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.* What this amounts to is a complete change in the way we see what is great in this world.

Jesus is giving us more than a moralism here (i.e. be generous to the poor). He is offering us a new vision for who is greatest in his Kingdom. We ought to run to the poor, the blind the lame, the afflicted, for they give us the ability to serve and this, in the end, is our greatest honor: to serve others, especially the poor and afflicted who cannot repay us.

A final dimension of all this is to learn that some of the greatest and most honorable people we know are those who serve us. Since to serve is the greatest honor in the Kingdom of God, we ought to hold in high honor those who wait on our tables, who clean our houses and work places, who do the “dirty work,” those also who serve in our hospitals and all those who care for us and serve us in countless ways. They are doing something honorable and we ought to treat them with respect, kindness, and honor. We ought to give generous tips where that is appropriate, but above all we are to honor them.

For the greatest among you is the servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Mk 10:43)

You gotta serve before you sit.