

Rev. Kevin Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NY September 1, 2019
22nd Sunday of Year C Luke 14: 1, 7-14

The musical "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" has been revived a number of times on Broadway. Soon after the musical originally appeared, some clergyman adapted the theme to the religious establishment, and wrote a book entitled, "How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious," in which he satirized the fact that church people are no less immune from similar temptations of careerism, blind ambition and office politics. This, by the way, is a theme that Pope Francis has also commented on a number of times in his homilies.

This attitude of calculating self-promotion and blind self-interest can affect any sphere of life, and it is precisely this "me-first" mentality that Jesus addresses in this morning's Gospel--this attitude of looking around at people and sizing them up along the scale of personal utility--"What can he do for me? How will knowing him or her come in handy someday?" "Is it worth my while getting to know him, or is he just a "loser?" This is a mind-set where one sees people as stepping-stones in one's career path or social swirl. It is this calculating attitude that Jesus addresses in today's Gospel. It is a form of egotism; it is to make one's self and one's concerns the center of the universe; the only thing that really matters to me is me. So, we might examine ourselves to see whether we find any similarities between the Gospel and our own behavior.

Jesus comments on the behavior of the guests who, in grabbing the best seats in the house, use the occasion as a chance to show off. How are we to interpret the words of Jesus here? Jesus is not to be taken literally here, but He is to be taken seriously. He is using humor to lampoon the social striving of the guests at the banquet. He is pushing their behavior to the extreme to show just how empty are their attempts to outdo their neighbors by claiming the more prestigious places at table for themselves. To take Jesus literally--to choose the cheap seats with the intent of being invited to the front--would be to condone all sorts of passive-aggressive behavior whereby one strives to get what one wants, while only pretending to be not at all interested in that pursuit.

Jesus is gently making fun of what He sees going on around Him. Generations of Christians have at times taken Him all too seriously, leading to the sad consequence that over the centuries all sorts of practices of self-abasement have been endorsed as the path to holiness with the assurance that these would gain for one a "higher place in heaven." Because people could not imagine that Jesus might be joking, they have

interpreted His words in such a way that they only reinforce our most acquisitive tendencies, albeit giving them a more spiritual emphasis. The result has been that the Christian way of life is pursued not for its own sake, but for more calculated reasons: often reduced to religious "fire insurance."

In J.D. Salinger's novella, Franny and Zooey, one of the characters sums up the matter in these words, "As a matter of simple logic, there's no difference at all, that I can see, between the man who's greedy for material treasure...and the man who's greedy for spiritual treasure...Treasure's treasure....And, it seems to me that ninety per cent of the world-hating saints in history were just as acquisitive and unattractive, basically, as the rest of us." He means the goal is to do the good thing for the sake of the good thing, and not for some reward.

Having a sense of humor, however, helps us see what Jesus is after. His aim is not to teach them to be more devious and calculating than they already are, but to expose the futility, the emptiness, of their whole approach to life. Still, they don't get it; they don't get the joke, because for them the acquisition of the tokens of social prestige were no laughing matter. The guests at the banquet all appear to be very serious men, very serious about their external appearance; very intent on defending themselves from any attack on their fragile egos.

It is the nature of the ego to be serious, to be on edge, to feel threatened, to be on the lookout for any possible slights that might be delivered, to be protective of its interests, and always figuring out how to maximize them. It is the sickness of the "ego," when puffed up and self-absorbed, that it can never fulfill all its fantasies, and so it grabs at tiny tokens of power and prestige to compensate for unfulfilled desires—things like the seating arrangements at banquets, or in our day, the location of one's office, the address where one lives, the car one drives, the clothes one wears, the school one attended, where one goes for vacation--all these things matter very much to such people. It is the "ego," inflated with a false sense of pride, that blocks the genuine self-knowledge and healing to which Jesus invites us.

Because the guests at the banquet were so caught up in their own ego-striving, they missed the joke, and so they missed the opportunity for salvation that Jesus was offering them. Salvation and healing come not with seriousness, not with our ego's self-absorption, but with a sense of humor, with the ability to laugh at ourselves; if we live not with self-absorbing seriousness, but in surrender to the truth about ourselves and others, as it is disclosed in the everyday events of life. It is that kind of self-honesty, this humility, this awareness of one's talents and deficiencies, that will prevent us from ever taking ourselves too seriously, and, thus, having to take recourse

in calculating every move to shore up our proud, ego-filled, illusory image of ourselves.

Today, let us pray in that we can be less serious about ourselves, less focused on the strivings of our own ego and more concerned about the needs of those around us. For, when we give ourselves to a cause or purpose greater than ourselves, when we recognize the more pressings needs of those around us and act in whatever way to alleviate them, when we do so simply for the sake of doing the good deed, then we can relax and experience the joy and the peace that comes from living the Christian way of life. That is the point Jesus makes about inviting the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame into our lines--essentially finding a place for all those who are left out by society. Our generosity has to extend beyond the confines of our family and friends to those who are in genuine need. The motivation that leads us to providing that help should be compassion for the less fortunate, and not some kind of cold, calculating deal-making with God—that because I have done a good deed, now God owes me. Let us pray that by putting our egos aside, we can more earnestly share in Christ's ministry to heal that portion of humanity that is broken, fragmented and all too often forgotten.