

Privilege is Not Providence

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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For many of us, when we look back on our life we say we've been blest. We look at all the comforts and securities we've had, at the financial stability and material goods we've enjoyed, at the many opportunities and chances we've been given, and we call it God's providence. While this sounds innocent enough, the author Amy Julia Becker, reflecting back on her own stable life, asks, "what if privilege, more than providence, had ordered and defined my existence?" (*White Picket Fences*, 112) In other words, maybe it wasn't God's providence at work, but simply her being born into privilege. While providence and privilege are sometimes used interchangeably by Christians, we need to be careful. Providence has everything to do with God. Privilege has little to nothing to do with God.

Privilege is something we've been hearing more and more about lately. While we like to think that the world is neutral and everyone starts out on the same footing, that simply isn't true. Some people, probably most of us in this church, started out with a head start. This had little to do with God blessing us or God's providence. It had everything to do with the location we were born, our race, our gender, and our family of origin. On a more political level, this whole concept of privilege plays itself out in taking sides and fighting. As Christians, we can do better than that! We don't need to fight or argue. We simply need to work on the virtue of humility.

In our First Reading from the Book of *Sirach*, the author counsels the reader, "conduct your affairs with humility...Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God." Already in the Old Testament, people are cautioned about letting 'greatness' go to their

heads. In fact, the greater one is, the more they need to humble themselves to find favor with God.

Then in our Gospel reading from *Luke*, Jesus tells this parable as he is dining in the house of one of the leading Pharisees, certainly a man of privilege. In this parable, Jesus warns against taking a seat of honor at a banquet. Even if one feels they deserve a seat of honor, they should humble themselves by starting out at the lowest seat available. Then, it will be up to the host to move them up higher. It is the ones who used their privilege to sit in the places of honor who will be embarrassed as they may have to move to a lower seat. The moral of the parable is that it is better to associate with the lowly, the poor, the cripple, the lame, and the blind as a starting point instead of starting from a place of privilege. Insisting on starting from privilege is a sign that one hasn't taken Christianity seriously.

Humility is the safeguard that protects us from privilege.

Question: Have I used my privilege to make myself superior than other people?

Privilege is a dangerous thing. Doing well and having successes in life may look like a blessing from God. It may make us feel good about ourselves and help us feel important. But it's not providence. Providence says, "everyone who exults themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves, will be exulted."