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## Sermon

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### Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17

The first wedding that I officiated at was that of my cousin Brian. I was a freshly ordained deacon, and curate at Trinity Church in Fort Wayne Indiana. I don't remember many of the details of the ceremony, except that all of my family was there and it felt like a great honor to begin this part of my ministry in such a familiar and joyous setting. Unfortunately Brian's marriage didn't last too long, but I'm hopeful that most of the marriages that I have solemnized over these past 36 years have.

Now that I'm semi-retired""some days still trying to figure out what that means""I'm not on the Cathedral wedding rota as I used to be. However I did officiate at lovely wedding in the Botanical Garden in June, and recently renewed the 50th wedding anniversary vows of a wonderful couple who are members of the Cathedral. Most of my wedding memories are of the hundreds of couples whom I have counseled and then officiated at their weddings, giving thanks to God for all those loving relationships that have been blessed by God and begun in the context of our Episcopal sacramental life.

We don't have as many weddings at the Cathedral as we did ten years ago, since many couples prefer "destination" weddings over the more traditional variety. Sandy beaches, mountain hillsides, and even more exotic destinations are often what couples prefer nowadays. This year, however, more couples have decided to have their weddings here in the Cathedral or chapel. In the same way that we begin our Christian life in baptism right here at the font, and end it in the church's burial rites, the church's marriage rites seem appropriate to take place here.

In reality, of course, no wedding ceremony ever seems to go exactly as planned. Weddings often, it seems to me, bring out the best and sometimes the worst in families. Too many expectations. Too many chiefs. Jesus seems to know this when he sets his parable lesson today at a wedding feast where everyone is already anxious""trying their hardest to look and act their best""and vying for the best seats and places at the ceremony.

At first glance, this story appears to be nothing more than a practical lesson in the twin virtues of courtesy and hospitality. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet", Jesus begins, "do not sit down at a place of honor." You might remember that at Palestinian and Middle Eastern wedding feasts, the guests of honor (all men by the way) recline on couches, with the center couch being the place of honor, with the other guests chosen according to wealth, power or office. If a more prominent man arrives late, someone of lesser rank is asked to move to a less prestigious location. At one level Jesus is offering sound advice to choose the lowest place so that you can be invited up higher. But of course Jesus is not some first-century Miss Manners who is only interested in table etiquette and protocol. He is pointing to something far deeper and richer. Perhaps Jesus knows that our selfish instincts are not confined to wedding banquets and the dinner table. It is part of the human experience to act in our own self-interest, sometimes even while seemingly acquiescing to the needs and wants of others. We do it all the time, sometimes without even thinking of it.

As Americans many of us pride ourselves on the values of rugged individualism and self-reliance. Social scientists tell us that it is unavoidable not to act in our own self interest. We have a natural propensity to foster and advance our own survival. Our economic system rewards those who make wise financial decisions, and many of us have benefited from the higher education that gave us need credentials and life experience to succeed in our vocations. As one bumper sticker popular in California put it: "It's all about me." That pretty much says it all.

At a certain level, of course, some might argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with this. Flight attendants warn us to secure our own oxygen masks before assisting others. Therapists urge their clients to be sure they are "getting their own needs met" before trying to reach out to others. And we all know the importance of self-care, trying to take responsibility for our own physical, mental and spiritual health.

But what takes place at the wedding banquet is Jesus' parable speaks to a different and more profound truth.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled," Jesus says, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Once again Jesus turns conventional values upside down. He is teaching us that the ordinary rules of self-interest, greed and pride no longer apply. In God's plan for the Kingdom the humble are exalted. The poor are rich. The crippled and lame are the well. And the blind ones now see.

It's not really about me after all. It's all about you, my neighbor.

Last weekend we were visiting Newport Rhode Island. Maybe you have been there. If you are a sailing fan you will know it as the former home of the Americas Cup sailing regatta. If you are architectural fan, you will know it both as a city filled with pre-revolutionary federal homes, as well as the grand cottages built by the rich and famous at the turn of the last century. If you have ever been to the Biltmore Mansion in Asheville, then imagine a whole long street lined with homes similar in grandeur and scale. They were built to show off the art and furnishings and design of America's wealthiest members, visual testimonies of how the richest members of America spent their summers. In the days before income tax or the stock market crash of the twenties, these families literally ruled the economic and social life of this country. The elegant and grand dining rooms entertained lavish dinner parties. According to tradition, however, the only invited guests were the rich and famous friends of their rich and famous guests. Surrounded by a great throng of servants<sup>40</sup> at the Vanderbilt home the Breakers-- these folks may have epitomized the fashion of their day. Many of them were even Prayer Book-caring Episcopalians. But one wonders if they ever heard today's Gospel reading in church, and what they might have thought about it.

As the world changed, so did the lifestyle of these folks at Newport. Many of the great houses were sold off or turned into rooming houses or allowed to deteriorate. Thanks to the preservationists, these homes now serve as fanciful and beautiful museums<sup>41</sup> a witness to another age. But in a real way these monuments to self-reliance, and dare I say greed, remind us that our lives as Christians are meant to be lived in service to one another not in laying up treasures on earth. There is certainly nothing wrong with being concerned about the well-being of your loved ones. But there is something wrong with the attitude that your concerns or your values or beliefs are not as worthy as mine. Like the Newport cottages, ultimately our self-reliance turns out to be an illusion. We all depend upon each other for our survival and dare our say even our happiness. We are all interconnected one to another and for the Christian we also must depend upon God who shows us the true meaning of life, and how to live it.

G. K. Chesterton once said America seemed to think of herself as a "nation with the soul of a church", which, if the soul of a church is a source of grace, civility and charity, is not necessarily a bad thing. The messages that I've been hearing of late, however, in our political world are far from graceful, civil or charitable. The level of polarization, of misinformation, and growing hostility toward anyone who doesn't look or vote or worship like I do, is becoming very frightening. As communities of faith, it is our challenge, it seems to me, to humbly address these issues, and to help one another make informed decisions about our common future. Whether we like it or not, the Gospel message often challenges us, for the kingdom of God is a realm often at odds with this everyday world of ours and it values. We too will be repaid, not necessarily with higher wages or better seats at the banquet, but in the only currency that really counts, the love God has for us and for all of God's children.

Unfortunately not every bride and groom who walks down this aisle will live happily ever after, despite all of our best efforts. Human life and love is unpredictable, and there are no guarantees. But God's love is always predictable. It is the pearl of great price and the prize at the end of the treasure hunt. It is ultimately the only thing in this world worth striving for.

"Blessed are all of those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." The Lord's Supper, the Holy Eucharist, serves as a foretaste of the wedding banquet when "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God." The host of this banquet will be the One who welcomes all to come to the table.

"So," Jesus said, "when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." So,,who will you invite to dinner tonight?

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