

This weekend, Jesus tells a parable while he is at a banquet and he is watching people struggling over who will get to sit where. We do not have many social situations in our time that resemble what Jesus was seeing. We live in a culture of assigned seating, amplification, and a desire for the appearance of equality. In Jesus' time, class distinctions and social hierarchies were a much bigger part of daily life. So, imagine you really wanted to see and listen to Jesus. Someone invited you as guest at a large banquet where Jesus was present. If you didn't sit close, you wouldn't get to speak to him or to hear him speak. Yes, you would be in the same room, but one's experience of dining with Jesus depended on how close you got to sit.

So, if you were there and your goal was to sit as close to Jesus as possible, you would use every argument you could to get close. "I have an important job. I am older and deserve respect. I can't hear very well and need to sit close. I am friends with host. I am friends with one of Jesus' disciples." All the arguments are some form of "I deserve."

Arguing out of privilege does not get you close to God, does not give you any happiness, nor does it prepare you for heaven. In the kingdom of heaven, becoming a bishop or even the Pope does not make you have more privilege than a little child saying their bedtime prayers. The sincere prayer of a homeless refugee is closer to the heart of God than a spiritually lazy politician.

The great joy of the kingdom of heaven is that not one of us deserve, not one of us can claim privilege, to God's gifts. Yet, in perfect freedom, God chooses to raise up the lowly. The divine economy is not transactional – I will do this so that God will do that. It is grace – God chooses to give life to those who are able to receive life. If you demand from God what you deserve, it would be a greater disappointment than coal in your stocking, because at least you would have a lump of coal. However, if you come before God as a beggar asking for life – God gives overflowing gifts of love because your heart is prepared to receive.

Another way to get at the heart of the parable is by considering forgiveness. Imagine you have somehow harmed another person. That person, because they are generous and kind, immediately forgives you for harming them. However, you refuse to accept any responsibility. You refuse to acknowledge that the other person was actually harmed by you. It doesn't matter to you if the person forgives you, because you won't admit you did anything wrong. That attitude is like the privileged pride Jesus is talking about in the parable. By refusing to admit your sin, you are also keeping away the joy of being forgiven. Forgiveness is a great joy, but accepting responsibility for one's faults takes great humility. But you can only receive the forgiveness if you let go of the pride.

As we come to altar today, God is present to give the gift of God's life – what we call grace – more abundantly than we could every imagine. However, if you come before the altar claiming privilege, you will walk away empty. If you come before the altar with humility, asking to receive God, you will receive more than you can understand in this moment.

From the first reading: “My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than than a giver of gifts...Water quenches flaming fire, and alms atone for sins.” The water of humility quenches the flame of pride burning in us. And giving, especially making a gift to someone in need, helps free you from sin. May we all be cleansed and freed from pride so that we can live in the life of the kingdom of heaven.