

## Exalted as God's Beloved

Pentecost 12 (Proper 17C)

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"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Familiar words in our Gospel reading this morning.

We think of ourselves as living in an era obsessed with status: where people show off their big cars and their big houses and — what I truly loathe — "influencers" exalt themselves by posting images on social media so their "followers" can ape their fashions and lifestyle. But this obsession with status is really nothing new. For as long as human beings have walked on this earth, I suspect we have been caught up in hierarchy and status.

In Jesus's time, one measure of status was where you sat at a wedding feast. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a parable, in the setting of a wedding feast, to teach us about humility: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

It's easy to interpret this passage as a sort of cosmic come-uppance: You may be on top today, but just you wait. The wheel of fortune will turn, and you will fall. Or, even worse, to see this as a divine directive to put up with abuse: you may be humbled now, but that's OK; you'll be rewarded in heaven for your forbearance. It's always worth remembering that Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God is a vision of what life can be on this earth, not just a vision of something we will encounter in the afterlife if we're all patient and good.

Another stumbling block is that "humility" can be a tough concept for those of us who struggle, or have struggled, with self-esteem. But the humility that Jesus is talking about isn't self-abasement. It's not about allowing ourselves to be doormats or to be taken advantage of or to fail to speak up for ourselves or others.

True humility is actually born of confidence — the confidence that comes from having a deep sense of self and not feeling a need to prove that to others through superficial display or boasting. Not feeling that you need to have the best seat at the wedding feast or the last word in the conversation or sole authority over decision-making. When we are confident in who we are, we don't need to broadcast it to others.

And who are we, really? We are all beloved children of God. That is the core of our identity. When we come to truly understand that — to know that palpable sense of God's love flowing through us and holding us close — we radiate that sense to others. They feel the love we have not just for ourselves but for God, and all of creation.

Maybe we even become — dare I say it? — *influencers* in the lives of others. We show them a glimpse of what a life centered in God looks like — as we strive to live in that way. True humility, born of security in our identity as children of God, helps us to recognize that where we sit is less important than whom we offer a seat to. Jesus tells us to invite the dispossessed to the banquet table — to welcome the stranger.

The writer of today's Epistle reminds us that by showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels without knowing it. Another beautiful and familiar phrase.

But again, the point isn't that you might someday be rewarded for being kind to an angel in disguise. True hospitality isn't transactional — it doesn't expect anything in return. The hospitality that Jesus challenges us to embrace is to see God in all people — in all people — and to invite our fellow children of God to the banquet table.

Jesus is calling us to a spiritual discipline — to choose to think not of our own status but of the comfort and well-being of others. Like any spiritual discipline, that choice transforms us. That craving for recognition, for having the last word, for being the best — it ebbs. It just goes away. And what we find instead is the peace that comes with knowing that our true identity is a beloved child of God, each and every one of us. We know our true worth. And we don't need to post on Instagram about it.

We are truly humbled. And in that, we are truly exalted as God's beloved. Amen.

*--Barbara Toman*