

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29
Psalm 68:4-5, 6-7, 10-11
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24A
Luke 14:1, 7-14
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Great Britain has been called a “shame culture.” It’s not that the British have any more to be ashamed of than anyone else. It’s rather that the fear of humiliation is a big motivator for them. The idea is that British people wake up in the morning with the ambition of getting through their day without making a spectacle of themselves. When they succeed, it can be counted a good day, regardless of whatever else may have happened. A poster I saw on a train in the UK brought this home to me. The object of the poster was to reduce “fare dodging” by encouraging people to buy a ticket for their entire journey before boarding the train. The poster’s argument was that if you fail to buy a proper ticket, the conductor might catch you, and then everyone would look at you.

Today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel suggests that Jewish society in Jesus’ time was also a shame culture. In it, our Lord offers an etiquette lesson for wedding guests:

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,
do not recline at table in the place of honor.

A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him,
and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say,
‘Give your place to this man,’
and then you would proceed with embarrassment

to take the lowest place.”

- presumably while everyone looked at you.

Of course, Jesus is using the fear of humiliation to make a more profound point, namely, “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” In other words, our Lord is concerned not so much with humiliation as with the related virtue of humility. He means, quite literally, that self-exaltation is devastating to one’s spiritual life, and, conversely, that humility is an essential prerequisite if we are to receive the good things promised us in Christ. Our First Reading makes the point succinctly: “Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God.”

Saint Simeon the Fool was a sixth century Syrian monk who after many years in the desert entered the city of Emesa dragging a dead dog behind him. Unsurprisingly, a gang of children immediately surrounded him and hurled insults at him. Now this seems like willful self-humiliation to me, but he’s a saint, so who am I to say. But for the rest of us, humility, not humiliation, is the object. The idea is to somehow get over ourselves. We need to defeat the persistent human instinct to make our lives all about us. The temptation is to live as if the number and quality of our possessions and experiences are the measure of all things. We believe this way of living will lead to fulfillment and happiness, but, in the words of Pope Francis, it leads instead to “desolation and anguish.” We shrivel up spiritually. The classic Christian prescription for overcoming this spiritual malady needn’t involve dead pets. It involves love. If we can truly love someone, anyone, we will put them and their needs ahead of our own. When, by this means, we empty ourselves of our self-obsession,

God's grace will fill the space we have created. The only real fulfillment is to be filled with the grace of the God who is Love. To embrace that grace is to be exalted indeed.