

Pentecost 12 – August 31, 2025 – Fr. John Warfel

One of the lighter things I learned at The School of Foreign Service
Was all the intricacies of a formal state dinner,
Service a la Russe,
A tricky 14 course ordeal
Complete with finger bowls, palate cleansers,
And a seemingly endless staff of waiters

We learned how to negotiate an individual place setting consisting of:
3 forks, 3 knives, 3 spoons and three pieces of stemware

We were instructed how to shift our conversation from the person on our right
to the person on our left seamlessly, midway during the dinner

We were told that if asparagus spears were served without a sauce or dressing
They were to be picked up with our fingers
And eaten individually, like a French fry.
Who knew?

But the most important thing we learned was NEVER, EVER to mess-
with the seating arrangements
Don't even think about shifting place cards, hoping that no one will notice;
Somewhere there looms a master seating chart;
You're bound to get caught.

Now, just as in the time of Jesus
Seating arrangements tell us instantly who is important and who is not

Jesus goes to eat the Sabbath meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee.
All the guests watch Jesus closely.
Not whether he uses the right fork
But whether he does something to violate the Sabbath
Or break the Holiness Code in some other way

Ah, but the guests weren't the only ones watching
Jesus watched them too as they scrambled for the seats of honor-
and he shares with them a parable.

When you are invited to a wedding banquet,
Do not sit down at a place of honor,
In case someone more distinguished than you has been invited,

and you are asked to give up your place.

Spare yourself the humiliation and disgrace:
Instead, take a seat at the lowest place.
Then wait to be asked by your host to move up.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say what to do-
if your host doesn't ask you to move up.
That's because Jesus' point has nothing to do with manipulating others-
in order to gain social status.
Just the opposite.

He says, choose the place at the end of the table,
because that's where the humble sit
Not at the place of honor, near the head of the table;
Not in the middle, among those who are satisfied that-
they're no more or less important than anybody else;
but at the end of the table, the humble end.

*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled
And those who humble themselves shall be exalted*
Here it is again: that great paradox of our faith
We hear it expressed it many ways

*The last shall be first and the first shall be last
Whatever you do for the least of these you do unto me
If I, your Lord and teacher wash your feet,
You also should wash one another's feet*

Humility is central to the Gospel;
Not self-deprecation, not humiliation but humility
Humility: humus, Latin for earth, ground, soil,
Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return
Humility: the acknowledgement that we are not the Creator;
We are the Created

But here's the irony
The moment we discern humility within ourselves, poof, it's gone
Humility can lead to pride
Once that happens, our humility goes right out the window.

Still, even at the risk of spiritual pride,
We are called always to **strive** for humility

The more we practice it,
The more we think of others first,
The more humility becomes as natural to us as breathing.
Eventually, it becomes second nature to us;
and we don't even notice it.

But fair warning:

This kind of transformation could lead to radical hospitality
A hospitality so radical that it neither expects nor wants reciprocation
That's precisely what Jesus tells his host to do the next time he throws a party
Presumably, Jesus was never invited back.

We at Good Shepherd are good at hospitality
Not just our coffee hours, Men's Breakfasts, parish dinners, funeral receptions-
and special occasion functions

Our hospitality extends beyond our parish family to the community in outreach
-Our active participation in All Faiths Food Pantry
-Volunteering at the Community Dinners once hosted at St. Mark's
-Our bread ministry that gathers and distributes surplus bread and baked goods
-Gifting prayer shawls that become outward and visible signs-
of inward and spiritual grace.
All of that is good, very good.

Radical hospitality, however takes us to the next realm, The Realm of God
Radical hospitality extends way beyond the poor,
the sick, the friendless and the needy

Radical hospitality stretches us way past our comfort level
Why it could move us to invite the homeless to come to our own houses;
treating them as intimate, esteemed guests,
Sharing our beds, linens, bathrooms, showers and bath-tubs
Setting out our best china, crystal and silver
I don't know about you, but I'm not there yet.

For now, let's just concentrate on less grand, simpler acts of **genuine** hospitality
Make it a habit to welcome the stranger in our midst
For by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it

Come to church functions, circulate at coffee hour
Sit at different tables, make it a point to talk to someone you don't know well
Christian fellowship is essential to the Body of Christ

Jesus wants us to meet new people
Jesus delights in the expansion our own comfortable circle of friends
Contrary to the old quip;
Not everyone in town who **should be** an Episcopalian **already is**

Jesus doesn't care if we don't use the right fork.
Jesus doesn't care about seating charts.
Jesus cares about how we love our neighbor.
And we'll never love her, we'll never see Christ in him
Unless we first make an effort to know both of them better.