

When I was a senior in college, it was the custom of the president of the Catholic College to host the graduating seminary students at his home for dinner. There were 16 of us, and were to dress in coat and tie.

It was quite a fine dinner. The president would play host at one end of a long table and his wife would preside at the other end. My friend Tom sat with me at the end of the table near the president's wife. Now Tom was a hulking kind of guy – very big, football player build. At one point mid-way through the dinner, he leaned back, and broke the back legs of the chair. As he went down, he grabbed the table-cloth, pulling down the entire table full of china, crystal, food and drink.

All of us sat there, frozen in horror. The president's wife gazed upon her banquet that had all slid onto the floor. She simply folded her napkin and said, "It appears that dinner has ended. Would anyone like dessert?!" I thought she was the coolest lady in the world!

Let's take a look at the biblical background for the banquet we just heard about in the gospel. Banquets served several functions in Jesus' day. At their most basic level, they were practical. In the era before refrigeration, perishable items could not be kept for long periods of time. Although ancient peoples came up with some ingenious solutions to the problem of food storage, they still had to consume much of what they grew fairly soon after harvest. One way to do so was to share it with neighbors and family through rituals of feasting. This is why weddings usually took place not long after the harvest -- in order to take advantage of the fresh food available at that time.

Banquets were also symbolic displays. They were foremost a demonstration of wealth. The ability to host a feast meant a family had access to land and labor, both of which revealed high economic status. Banquets were also displays of a family's social connections. Few houses had rooms set aside specifically for dining. Family meals took place in the open air, usually on the roof or in a front courtyard. Large feasts required the use of public areas of a village or town like streets or squares. One's guests would thus be visible to everyone. Host families would give places of prominence to important guests not just to honor them but to show off the host family's own social connections. A place of prominence likewise reinforced the prestige of important guests like royal or military officials, religious leaders and people of wealth and privilege. For both guests and hosts, banquets were opportunities to see and be seen.

Reciprocity was expected. Relatives invited each other to family feasts, establishing and strengthening ties even among distant kin. Reciprocity also supported elite culture. A royal official invited to a family's wedding feast would in turn, invite the hosts to a similar banquet or, even better, would secure the family an invitation to a royal event. Banquets thus played a vital role in supporting the status of those with even modest wealth and connections.

Jesus participated in this feasting culture. Remember, Luke's entire gospel takes place around 10 meals. Commenting on this fact, Fr. Jim Dunning wrote: "The Lukan Jesus must have weighed 300 pounds! He was always going to, seated at, or coming from a dinner. The smell of food practically wafts off every page!" (I believe this is taken from ECHOING GOD'S WORD) Many of Jesus' most important teachings occurred at banquets or dinner parties – they were useful for His mission of evangelization. But because He knew the culture so well, He also recognized its troubling aspects. Feasts were opportunities for competition and strategic social and political maneuvering. Banquets could be occasions for generosity and for building ties of

affection, but too often they became calculating performances for the pursuit of status. (adapted from Michael Simone, SJ, in AMERICA, August 2019 issue, p. 52)

Second, so what's the issue? It's status. Who has it, how we get it, who doesn't and how we treat them. This is just another expression of pride. St. Ignatius said that we are first tempted to desire riches, which leads to honors, which often leads to pride – the gateway to a gamut of sinful behavior. The shorthand phrase is 'riches to honors to pride.' Riches and honors are seductive. Once we get a taste of them, we easily become proud and arrogant.

Jesus was a master psychologist. He knew that we all crave recognition. He knew that the desire for status is an innate part of our human condition. Most of us don't want to simply keep up with the Joneses – we want to be slightly ahead of the Joneses, the Smiths, and everyone else on the block.

It is very human to want to be one-up on others. There was a Harvard study where they asked students: "If prices were the same, which option would you choose: Option A: you make \$50,000 per year and everybody else makes \$25,000 per year, or Option B: You make \$100,000 per year, but everybody else makes \$200,000 per year?" The majority of the students chose Option A. They would rather make \$50,000 and everyone else make \$25,000 than make \$100,000 and have everyone else make \$200,000.

That says a ton about our human nature. Status is at least as powerful a motivator as money. That's true today. It was true 2000 years ago. Jesus knew that, and saw an opportunity to use that very natural craving for recognition to teach us some very useful lessons. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2019, p 48)

Two college freshmen in an Ivy League University considered each other their chief rival for valedictorian after the first semester's grades were posted. They did not meet each other, but they read their names, one above the other, on the bulletin board. Each semester, as the grades were posted outside their professor's doors, they carefully monitored their progress toward their goal. And each semester, one of them would be on the top, the other barely below. Now, though they recognized each other, they never met. Neither of them ever made a gesture of friendship. When the time came for graduation, sure enough, one of them made valedictorian and the other salutatorian. Each walked across the stage and received his certificate, and each disappeared to take up his chosen profession.

40 years later, one of them was a portly and balding gentleman, dressed in the brilliant scarlet robes of the church that signified he was a Cardinal. This portly and balding gentleman entered Grand Central Station and immediately spotted his collegiate rival. He was tall and ramrod straight, dressed in a snappy military uniform with 4 stars across his shoulders – a General. The Cardinal, in his flowing robes, thought, "Here we are, former college mates and leaders of our respective professions, and we've never even met one another. The least I could do as a man of the cloth is to take the initiative and speak to my rival. So he crossed the busy Grand Central reception room, faced his old rival and said, "Conductor, can you tell me when the next train leaves for Chicago?" The 4 star General responded, "I don't know, Madam, but should a woman in your condition be traveling?" (DYNAMIC PREACHING, p Oct-Dec 2016, p. 20-21)

Third, the solution. It's there in the simple opening state of our first reading from Sirach: "My child, conduct your affairs with humility....humble yourself....and you will find favor with God." (Sir 8:17-18) The solution is to be humble. When St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, wrote his rule, he made his chapter on humility its keystone. He said that pride is the basic flaw of humanity and that humility is its corrective. He wrote for a Roman culture that valued machismo, power, and independence at least as much

as ours. Benedict said that humility is an antidote to violence and a key to mental health. (TWELVE STEPS TO INNER FREEDOM, Joan Chittister, p. 19)

There was a banquet held in Washington, DC some years ago – the occasion was a commemoration of Harry S. Truman’s 100th birthday. All the big names were out in ties and tails to honor the event. A White House member related that one of the guests turned to the woman seated next to him, “Did I get your name correctly” the man asked. “Is your name Post.?” “Yes, it is,” the woman replied. “Is it Emily Post?” “Yes,” she replied. “So you are the world-renowned authority on manners?” the gentleman inquired. “Yes,” Mrs. Post replied, beaming to be so recognized. “But why do you ask?” “Because, madam, you’ve just eaten my salad.” (HOMILETICS, Dec 2006). Life has a way of GIVING us humility, even if we don’t have it.

Humility keeps us grounded. Humus, earth. Close to the earth. Former vice president Walter Mondale liked to tell this story on himself. Mondale was campaigning in Lewiston, Maine. A huge crowd came out to see him off. “I’m really very, very flattered,” Mondale said as he was about to board his plane. “There must be about 2000 people here!” “Yes,” he was told by one of the natives. Then the citizen of Maine added, “But, to be perfectly truthful, we’ve never had a 747 land or take off at our airport before. Everyone turned out to see if it takes off ok or crashes.” (DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2003, p. 11)

But here’s a good summary of humility from Sr. Joan Chittister. “I am not everything I could be. I am not even the fullness of myself, let alone a pinnacle for which my family, my friends, my world, the universe should strive. I am only me. I am weak often, struggling always, arrogant sometimes, hiding from myself most of the time, and always in some kind of need. I cover my limitations with flourish, of course, but down deep, where the soul is forced to confront itself, I know who I really am and what, on the other hand, however fine the image, I really am not. Then, the Rule of Benedict says, we are ready for union with God.” (ILLUMINATED LIFE: MONASTIC WISDOM FOR SEEKERS OF LIGHT, p. 56) So may it be for you and for me. Amen.