

*Goodbye to Middle School*

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

When I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, there was no Facebook, no Instagram no Snapchat. But, don't get me wrong. We had our own forms of social media. The one I distinctly remember involved those little school portraits. You know, the ones that are so utterly precious in elementary school-- the messy hair and missing teeth. But by middle school, we all were ready for picture day. We looked good! And when those pictures came back, the fun really began. We traded them with one another—sort of like baseball cards. And I distinctly remember putting the photos of my friends and acquaintances into the plastic holder in my wallet—it was very similar to “friending” people on Facebook. I would carry these photos with me, wherever I went. And it was a common ritual to show the pictures to one another—so others would know whose photos you were carrying.

And the weirdest thing for me to remember now is that these portraits had varying values. So, if I was given a photo of a super popular person, it was like gold, and I put it in the front of my wallet collection. Not so popular? You were probably toward the back. It all reminds me of the game that is so hot right now: Pokemon Go where different characters hold different values: the Magic Carp: is weak and the Meutwo is strong. It was just like that—different people had different values on the popularity scale. And in my mind, I knew, almost like a numeric value, how much a person was worth, and having his/her photo in my wallet gave me “points”!

How embarrassing! How horrible! But how natural. And I don't fault my little 8<sup>th</sup> grade self—she was just surviving! My middle school was very big and not super hospitable. I was a new student, just moving in from another state. I was doing the best I could. Aren't we all? Do we ever really grow out of our adolescent selves? Or do we push them down, to the unconscious

level, where every now and then, maybe more often than we care to admit, they are still runnin' the show?

Today Jesus calls us all to accountability—even those of us who are actually still in school! Jesus tells us to stop obsessing about our social status. Jesus tells us to stop assigning social status to one another. In fact, Jesus tells us to reverse the order of the photos in our wallets, to intentionally embrace those who seem the least “valuable” to us. Because in doing so, we will catch a glimpse of the fullness of God’s love, and we will be blessed.

Today’s Gospel reading sounds like an etiquette lesson for Christians: Table manners 101. And if you want to take it at face value, I don’t think it will hurt you. Cliff Notes version: Don’t always push your way to the front and be inclusive of people who are in need. So, if you have listened all you can stand today, just go ahead and zone out. I won’t be offended! But I do think there is more. So let’s go there.

In the first part of our reading, Jesus is obviously speaking against the sin of pride. And this is not the only passage of

Scripture that does so. But we have to be very careful when we internalize such teachings—especially when applied in an oversimplified way. I love what Gretchen Wolff Pritchard writes in our Children’s Bulletin “The Sunday Paper.” And, by the way, I recommend these for all ages. Gretchen wisely warns parents to remember how misleading Biblical interpretations can be for children. She writes: *“Some kinds of pride are negative, some may be positive or negative, but one is purely positive. We should get this clear for our children’s sakes: in spite of how some of us may have been brought up: the warm glow that humans feel when they have done something well or made someone happy is no sin. Theologically, it is not “pride” at all but meekness: not a desire to be first but a delight in being the creature God made us to be, in and in sharing who we are or pleasing those whom it is our calling to please.*

*Jesus tells a funny story about grownups fighting for seats like obnoxious kids . . . That doesn’t mean we are to grovel—or to wait in martyred anticipation for someone to notice us and move us up*

*to the front row. We are simply to enjoy the party the Host has made for us, and, in love and meekness, to help others to do the same.”*

I so appreciate Gretchen Pritchard’s words here. And maybe you do to. Because embodying the teachings of Jesus is tricky business! And I think the greatest gift Jesus’ parables give us is a complete change of perspective. Jesus airlifts us out of our immature worldview and sets us down on a much higher plain where we see all of God’s creation, including eternity. And not in a literal sense of – I better invite the blind and the lame to my party so I can get to heaven. Jesus is saying: *Look up from your insecurities, look up from your petty definitions of winners and losers, know that you are blessed, you are loved, you are invited to the greatest party in the history of creation, and you can invite others! And guess what? It is going on right now—enjoy some appetizers! Let’s party!*

For those of you who are literally still in Middle School, I am happy to report that about halfway through High School, it seems

the popularity ladder can begin to fade away. In fact, many people begin to embrace the folks around them and appreciate one another on a new level. And from my observations, it gets even better in college. But we must remain vigilant—because adults can revert! Are we pushing too hard to sit at the head of the table? Do we define ourselves by our place in the line-up? Are we surrounding ourselves with people who can pay us back somehow—people who provide social dividends? Are we reaching out beyond our comfort zones, as a spiritual discipline, to form true, equal relationships with others who don't look like us or think like us. What behaviors are we modeling for our children and teenagers? Are we willing to invite people into our lives who don't appear to bring much to the table? Today Jesus tells us that if we embrace our status as beloved by God, this wider embrace is a natural response. When we recognize that our seat at the table is secure, we relax and begin to notice those who haven't found a chair yet. The actor, Martin Sheen, is a devout Roman Catholic. In a fabulous interview with Krista Tippett, Sheen describes his own

sense of God's love and how he feels when standing in line for communion.

Sheen says: *It is so overwhelming, at times, this reality of loving because one is loved that it just brings you up short. You just sit and stare sometimes into a vacuum and say, where did this come from, and why is it so clear, and why is it so simple, and so powerful? And one of the great mysteries that I experience at mass is the reception at communion. How do we embrace that? How can we possibly, consciously understand what that is? And I don't have a clue. I just stand on line and say, "I'm . . . Martin, your friend, you're welcome here. And I'm with them."* [laughs]

*Whoever the crowd is, I'm getting on line with, you just look at the people who are on that line, that community, that is the greatest and simplest expression of overtly trying to explain this mystery (of God's love) I'm talking about, because it is a mystery.*

*It is probably the most profound mystery in all of the universe, this love. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed just watching people on line to embrace that sacrament. It is the most profound thing. I never ever can get over it. It's just something you have to surrender to. And just saying yeah, I'm with them. That's the community of saints.*

We give thanks today for the communion of saints that surrounds us here at Christ Church and beyond. We especially celebrate a beloved saint, our brother, George Maxwell. George led this congregation for many years. He was a person of gravitas—intellectually, spiritually, professionally. And yet, he was a humble servant. In retirement, George stood in line for Communion with the rest of us. He cheered me on, as a new priest, when I celebrated at the Diocesan Office, and I was soooooo nervous! George knew he had a place and the table, and he knew how to invite others in to share the meal. Today during Holy Communion, we can follow Jesus' teachings and the example of our brother George-- enjoying and embracing our place in the line, whether it's the front, back or middle. We celebrate the diversity of need and brokenness and giftedness that gathers for this heavenly banquet—this foretaste of the fullness of God. And we

go forth from this place, shining with the glory a'nd sharing the  
good news of God's amazing love. Amen