

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

“Table Talk”

Rev. Andrew Harris · August 28, 2022

The year is 1970 and Barbara Streisand stands in front of what appear to be rows and rows of glittering crystals the size of a human head. She wears a pink gown, dotted with silver sparkles and a luxurious applique, with a pillbox hat to match.

“May I have the envelope, please?” she asks before accepting the aforementioned envelope from a tuxedoed gentleman who appears from off-screen.

“Inside this envelope,” she says, “is one of five names, all of whom have been nominated for the best performance by an actor. Peter O’Toole, Dustin Hoffman, John Voight, Richard Burton, and John Wayne.” She tears the seal of the envelope, she takes a deep breath, laughs, and looks around, drawing out the tension of the moment.

She looks at the slip of paper, smiles, clutches it to her chest, before finally saying, “The winner is John Wayne, True Grit.”

The audience erupts in applause as an orchestra begins playing and a far-off camera scans the audience before it finally finds The Duke in a black tuxedo with a bowtie. He quickly makes his way onto the stage and up to the podium where he accepts his golden statuette, gives Babs a kiss on the cheek, and bows, first to her, then to the audience, as he dabs a single tear from his right eye.

“I’m no stranger to this podium,” he says. “I’ve come up here and picked up these beautiful golden men before, but always for friends. One night I picked up two. One for Admiral John Ford,

one for our beloved Gary Cooper. I was very clever and witty that night, the envy of even Bob Hope, but tonight I don't feel very clever or very witty. I feel very grateful. Very humbled."

I don't know if this is the first instance of a celebrity saying they're humbled during an award acceptance speech, but it's one of the most famous examples, and it's become a staple of award acceptance speeches and it's always bugged me.

Why this word, humbled? Are all these actors, musicians, and athletes just using the wrong word to convey the emotion they're feeling? When I put myself in their shoes, humbled isn't quite the emotion I'd expect to be feeling. Honored, certainly. Grateful, sure. But humbled? Not so much.

I've noted the use of this word in so many acceptance speeches and been so vexed by its inclusion that when I think of the word itself, humble, I can't help but think of Barbara Streisand's glittering gown, John Wayne's single tear, and the enormous sparkling crystals behind them. What exactly about this experience is humbling?

Let's assume for today that all these celebrities are not just misapplying the word to portray a sense of false modesty or regurgitating a boilerplate turn-of-phrase mistakenly cemented into the acceptance speech lexicon. Let's assume that most of them have thoughtfully reflected on what they might say, and they found that this word actually does convey what they want to say. Assuming all this, it seems to me the humbling sensation they're attempting to express is the feeling of, "Who? Me? Really?"

I can understand why someone would feel this way while being praised and honored, and I suppose that's a humbling sensation. Even John Wayne, when holding a beautiful golden man next to Barbara Streisand, hears a little voice inside of him reminding him that he was once a little boy from Winterset, Iowa named Marion Robert Morrison. No matter how exalted we may become, there's no escaping the true person we know ourselves to be, no matter how hard we try to hide it or escape it.

If Wikipedia knows that John Wayne was born Marion Morrison, God knows it too, and much more. When we exalt ourselves, God knows who we truly are. God knows the mistakes we've made, God knows the embarrassing things we've done, God knows the times we've been broken and weak. When we exalt ourselves, God reminds us of who we truly are. But similarly, when we are broken and weak, when we make mistakes, when we're embarrassed and ashamed and low, God knows who we really are, a singular beloved creation born out of eternity into a time and place to shine a light, to share love, to receive grace. When we humble ourselves, we will be exalted.

It's important to remember that this story is a parable that illustrates a larger point about God's kingdom. It is not, as it is often interpreted, a guide on how to receive exaltation and avoid shame at a dinner party. *Do you want to be exalted at your next dinner party and avoid disgrace? Follow these simple tips!* That's not how Jesus operates. If we wind up sitting in the lowest place looking up at the host like a patient and obedient dog waiting for a reward, then we've missed the point. Jesus is criticizing the desire to exalt ourselves. He's criticizing the mad rush to the seats of honor and the envy of those lower down who look up longingly. If all we learn is to reverse the

orientation of the table, creating a mad rush for the lowest seat, then we're exactly where we were before.

The larger point Jesus makes can be seen on the face of Marion Morrison as he wipes away his single tear while accepting a little golden man. At our moment of greatest honor and exaltation, we become most aware of our lowliness, and we would do well to remember that all the achievement, success, and exaltation in the world cannot change who we really are. This parable criticizes the very notion of social hierarchy and mobility by presenting an alternate flattened vision where the exalted are brought down and the lowly are lifted up and all people have a seat at the table. This is not the only time such an image is presented in the gospels. Remember Mary's Magnificat from earlier in Luke's Gospel where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up.

Whenever we hear the Magnificat during advent season, I hear Mary's words as a hopeful vision of God's promised future. As in, this isn't the way things are, but when God's Kingdom comes, it will be. Then when I reflect on Jesus's parable here it strikes me that this is the way things are right here, right now; that God's promise to lift up the lowly and strike down the exalted and the powerful is happening moment to moment, being realized in every prideful moment of exaltation and every moment of shameful desperation. God is constantly reminding us all of who we really are, which is nothing more than a child of God invited to take a seat at the table of grace. And what more could we need?

Just in case anyone was thinking that Jesus's story was about how to please God and set yourself up for some future reward, Jesus follows it up with the second part of the story where he offers advice to those hosting a dinner party. Jesus says, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed because they cannot repay you."

This is not a parable about rewards. It's not about getting what you want, getting into heaven, or having your prayers answered. This is not a parable about the promised future. Those of us hoping to humble ourselves for some future reward are upended by this latter story and it reframes the first part of what Jesus told us about the exalted and the lowly. Nothing about this story is a recipe for receiving exaltation. In fact, it says the true blessing comes from abandoning the thought of rewards and repayment completely.

The banquet with the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind is the perfect representation of God's Kingdom. It's a world free from using people for personal gain. It's a world free from ulterior motives, free from the prison of social mobility, free from the perception of superiority and inferiority that divides us from our neighbors and poisons our souls. We're free from the self-conscious judgment of ourselves and others. The structures of social hierarchy fall apart when we are able to look at all people as distinguished guests at God's banquet where the seats of honor have been rearranged and we're all blessed just to have a seat at the table.

I suppose I've fallen once again into the habit of describing a world which does not exist, because we look around and we see that the purity culture and honor society that Jesus defied has remained, although it has taken different forms throughout the centuries. What is considered pure and honorable may change, but our restless desire to be perceived as pure and honorable has not.

And this, I suspect, is the real reason the word “humbled” shows up so often in award acceptance speeches — we consider it virtuous and honorable to show humility and deference in such moments. The pride and arrogance may be there underneath, but to let it out would be a shameful, dishonorable display.

It’d be tough to find a more arrogant, self-important, gatekeeper of human dignity than John Wayne. This is a man who has stated on the record that he believes in White Supremacy and that the American Indians were selfishly trying to keep land for themselves among other views that Christians ought to find abhorrent. He seems to be just the kind of guy who would dishonestly abuse the word “humbled” in an award acceptance speech so as to appear modest, grounded, and magnanimous.

Only God can know whether, in that moment, he humbled himself with an eye towards exaltation, or whether he felt truly, deeply humbled. But this is the crux upon which swings the fate of our eternal souls. God have mercy on those who humble themselves in hopes of exaltation, for blessed are those who seek no repayment. From where we sit, observing events from the other side of the screen, observing other people from the confines of our own interior consciousness, we cannot know the inner workings of their hearts and it’s not for us to know, nor should it be for us to care, lest we enter into a world of judgment which only serves to reinforce this hierarchical system of who is better or more honorable than whom.

But you can have faith in this truth: God is in the continual process of lifting up the lowly and bringing down the mighty. In the stillness of the heart, even the most arrogant Hollywood cowboy is reminded of who he really is. It’s what we do with this knowledge that counts. We could insist upon our superiority by bringing others down. We could run away from ourselves into fantasy worlds. We could ignore our inner selves so as not to feel weak and vulnerable.

Or we could embrace the lowliest part within us, the part that knows we are nothing without God’s grace, the part that knows how deeply dependent we are on so many people, the part that knows how undeserving we really are. Who? Me? We say with abject humility as God calls us by name to receive the gift of grace, far more precious and valuable than the beautiful golden men. How can we help but wipe the tears from our eyes and say we feel very grateful. Very humbled. Amen.