

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

We humans love to determine who is in and who is out.
We love to determine the pecking order.
We love to determine who is first class and who is not.

This brings us to today's text.
We have Jesus watching the dinner guests jostle for position.

Can you see the argument taking place in this morning's text? The disciples were finally about to eat some real food. Their itinerant lifestyle was far less glorious than that of traveling salesmen and women. In fact, I think they were probably only one-step above beggars in the social world of the ancient near east. They had no home. We are not aware of any sort of work or labor that they did. They wandered from town to town, completely dependent upon kindness of townspeople to feed and clothe and house them.

In each town, Jesus would teach those they could gather about. I am sure there were a few benefactors who gave them money to help with their travel expenses. We know Judas was charged with keeping their common purse; this probably consisted of a few small coins that they were given by benefactors. They had nothing to sell; they had no labor they could perform. This ragged band of travelers simply came to town and began to teach in the local synagogue. Come to think of it, in many ways, they **were** beggars.

Now they were invited to a feast. How thrilling to eat real home-cooked food, but this banquet was about more than food. In NT times, meals were important social ceremonies.

People noticed where you ate.
People noticed with whom you ate.
People noticed whether you washed before you ate.
People noticed where you sat when you ate.
All of these matters reflected one's social position and honor.

Let's talk a bit about Roman Table Manners.

When Romans gathered they would sit about a table to feast....but they didn't sit in chairs...they reclined. Specifically, they reclined with their feet behind them and rested on their left arm/elbow. This kept their right hand free for eating.

The guest of honor was not where I would expect. The guest of honor is seated at the end of the middle table. I wonder if this did not create something of a "power corner" for the guest of honor...and for the host. Etiquette was strictly enforced. If a guest was seated wrongly the party could be ruined.

Here's a drawing of what a dinner party might look like.
Can you pick out the guest of honor?

Here is an excavated triclinium from Pompeii. Tricliniums were the dining room in wealthy homes. The word – triclinium – means “three couches.” The stone benches in this photo would have thick cushions upon them to make them comfortable.

Just as there was a seating chart, there was also an order to the meal.

Appetizers consisted of

- Lettuce (to relax the stomach)
- Wild mint (to make everyone burp)
- A variety of fresh vegetables
- 3 kinds of eggs (chicken, pheasant, and quail)

Dinner consisted of 2 courses.

For the first course the “heavier meats” were often served. This included things like wild boar and delicacies like peacock tongue.

For the second course the lighter meats were served. Sparrows, blackbirds, fish, mussels, clams. The second course often ended with a serving of eels garnished with sea urchins.

After the dinner course the servants prepared for **dessert** by placing new table clothes on the tables and sweeping the floors. Then out came plenty of fresh fruit and pastries, this was often followed by Roman cheesecake of sorts.

In sum, the Roman banquet was not merely a meal, rather it was a calculated spectacle of display that was intended to demonstrate the host’s wealth, status, and sophistication to his guests. At the same time the host wanted to outdo the lavish banquets of his elite friends and colleagues. He wanted to one-up them.

In some cases, the host was not even in the same room as his guests. Instead, the host was in his own private dining room with a few select friends, enjoying the best of food, while other guests was served poor quality food away from the host.

This is what Jesus rails against. His commentary on ancient meal customs and social stratification makes two points. First, one should practice and cultivate humility, that is clear. Secondly, even though the practice of humility is proper and prudent, God’s kingdom will bring about an even more revolutionary reversal. The very standards and practices of discrimination will be reversed. Those who are cast out will be welcomed as equals in God’s kingdom.

So the disciples are about to get some real food at dinner with the Pharisee. Finally something to eat other than figs grabbed from a roadside tree or raw grain snatched from field as they passed through.

Then they remember that there will be a seating chart at this meal. They knew where the Pharisee would sit. They also knew where Jesus would sit. In the middle table immediately to the left of the Pharisee...the seat of honor.

But as we know, perhaps not everyone will even be in the same room, nor will they be receiving the same food. This scramble for position by the guests is about more than just honor, it is about food.

Where they sit matters at this banquet.

What will they eat?

Will the disciples be given the good food?

Will they eat the bloated turtledove rump or the magpie that died in a cage?

Where they sit matters.

I am not surprised that they wrestle for the first class position.

On a visit to the Southwest of this country, I learned an interesting detail that reminded me that despite all the ways we humans have changed over the years, some things never change.

You will remember that the stagecoach was the main mode of transportation in the Wild West. The vehicles back then were relatively small. At most, they carried six passengers. However, even among those six passengers there were classes. Tickets came in three classes – similar to airline tickets today. Stagecoach tickets came in first, second and third class. The distinction, however, did not have to do with the size of the seat or the kind of food that was served, but rather what was expected of the ticket holder.

The first-class ticket, which, of course, was the most expensive, entitled the ticket owner to remain in the stagecoach no matter what. When you got the most expensive ticket, this meant is that you were exempt from having to put forth any kind of effort. A second-class ticket meant that if difficulty arose, you had to get out and walk alongside the stagecoach until the difficulty could be resolved. The cheapest ticket – the third-class one – called on the ticket holder to take responsibility for the difficulty.

This meant the third-class passenger not only had to get out of the coach when there was a problem, but he (or she) also had to get down in the mud and do whatever had to be done so that the coach could get through the mud or get up the hill. They bought their third-class ticket, in part at least, with what we might call "sweat equity". Needless to say, this third-class ticket was the least prestigious of all the tickets.

When – not if – the coach became bogged down in the mud or the horses were too tired to climb a hill, the second-class passengers would get out and walk alongside the coach. The third-class passengers would get out and help push the coach up the hill or through the mud. All the while, the first-class passengers would remain comfortable and clean, seated inside the coach.

I wonder if that doesn't sometimes that reflects the way we think.

We often think that when we are first-class, we are privileged and exempt from having to do the most menial kinds of work.

Then it dawned on me how radically different Jesus' values are. When he came to live upon the earth, he gave a very different interpretation of first-class. He turns the value system of the world upside down.

Jesus dared to say that in God's eyes to be first-class was not the privilege of having everything done for you, rather being first-class meant a willingness to do the opposite.

To be first-class in God's eyes means to take on the role of a servant who is willing to do the dirty and menial work.

Jesus says, to be first-class in God's eyes means to deal with the problem.

To be first-class in God's eyes means that we do not just sit in the stagecoach and watch others get dirty and sweat.

To be first-class in God's eyes means to throw oneself into solving the problem, to get muddy and bloody in effort to solve it.

Do you recall the last night of Jesus' earthly life, when he shared a meal with his disciples? The disciples had gathered that Passover eve in an upper room, but an awkward mood settled over that little group that night. You see, they had been walking all day on the dirt roads, and their feet very much needed to be washed...and nobody wanted to do it.

Earlier that day the disciples had been heatedly arguing about who among them was going to be the greatest; in other words, who was first class and would be served by the others?

Who was going to get to occupy the places of honor in the coming Passover meal?

Who would sit at the middle of the table next to Jesus?

A spirit of competition divided that little band of brothers, and not one of them wanted to do the dirty work of washing the others' feet. None of them wanted to be third class. They all wanted to be first class.

As you will recall, Jesus used the opportunity to provide an object lesson. Jesus himself took the towel and the basin and washed the disciples' feet. By the way, this was often done after the guests had reclined on their cushion with their feet out behind them.

Jesus became third class.

Jesus got dirty.

Jesus took the role of the servant.

Not one of the disciples would have asked, let alone imagined, that Jesus take on this role.

Peter says, "Lord, **you** cannot wash my feet."

He was their teacher.

He was their rabbi.

He was their leader.

And, as they were coming to learn, Jesus was God in the flesh.

Yet, he became third-class and washed the dirt from their feet.

John says, "Jesus, knowing he came from God and was going to God...", got up from the table, laid aside his garment, wrapped himself in a towel, and proceeded to deal with the dirt; that is, to do the work of a servant and wash the feet of his 12 companions.

When Jesus had finished, he once again took his place at the table and said (in my paraphrase), "I have modeled for you who I am and who you are. This is the true secret of greatness. First-class is not one who lords himself or herself over you as if they were superior. Rather one who is first class is free to do whatever the situation demands – no matter how dirty or unpleasant. Why? Because first-class disciples know their needs are met by the grace of God.

This is the foundation of the Jesus revolution. True first-class status, according to Jesus, is not one of exemption or privilege where you pay the most so you can do the least.

Rather, according to Jesus, first-class is the eagerness to do whatever the situation requires...whatever, no matter how menial or disagreeable.

How can we do this?

We can only live in this way when we know our worth comes from God and not from our own achievements.

What was said of Jesus is the deepest truth about each one of us.

We, too, come from God and are going to God.

We are of God.

We are God's children.

Because we are God's beloved children, we can get muddy.

Because we are God's beloved children, we are free to do what needs to be done.

Because we are God's beloved children, we are first class.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.