

Do you remember when you learned table etiquette? When setting the table, the fork goes to the left of the plate. The knife and the spoon go to the right. Don't chew with your mouth open. Don't eat with your fingers. Don't lick your plate. Of course, when you live alone, you can get away with all those things.

The fancier the meal, the more you have to know. A friend of mine taught me this little trick. How do you remember where the bread plate goes and where the dessert plate goes? Put your thumb and index fingers together with your fingers straight up. My left hand forms a "b" so that's where the bread plate goes. My right hand forms a "d" so the dessert plate goes on the right.

Sometimes, you take your place at the table and there's more than one fork. Start from the outside and work your way in. God forbid you use your big fork for the salad. Now, you're stuck using your small fork for the main course. It's that kind of social faux pas from which it can be very hard to recover.

In our reading today, it appears as though Jesus is giving advice on how to avoid an embarrassing social situation. He attended a dinner gathering. When he noticed people choosing their places, he decided to tell a parable. On the surface, it seems to be wise advice regarding table manners.

When attending a wedding banquet, here's how to save yourself some embarrassment. Don't choose the place of honor and run the risk of being asked to move to a lower place. Instead, go to the lower place and maybe you will be invited to move up to a place of honor. Here, Jesus offers some helpful advice on how to manage a routine social situation.

However, what he says at the end of his parable signals that this is not just advice about how to conduct oneself at a party. Jesus said, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The implication is that how one conducts oneself at a wedding banquet has implications for the future. The banquet reveals something of God's purposes.

What Jesus does in this story reminds me of that cinematic masterpiece *The Karate Kid*. In the movie, Daniel is a young man who gets into trouble at school. He wants to learn how to fight. He learns that the caretaker at his apartment complex, Mr. Miyagi, can teach him karate.

Mr. Miyagi agrees to teach Daniel if he does everything he's told, without asking any questions. They make a pact. The first thing Mr. Miyagi does is give Daniel some mundane chores to accomplish. He instructs him how to sand a floor, how to paint a fence, and how to wash and wax a bunch of cars in the parking lot.

Daniel balks, of course. Mr. Miyagi responds, "Ah, ah, no questions." Daniel works at all these chores for hours and hours, until he can barely even lift his arms. At the moment when he is most exasperated, thinking his teacher had taken advantage of him, Mr. Miyagi says, "Show me wax on" and goes to strike him. Daniel uses the "wax on" arm motion to block the punch.

Mr. Miyagi continues to try to strike at Daniel while Daniel uses all the motions for "sand the floor," "paint the fence," and "wax off" to block every strike. Suddenly, Daniel realizes it was never about sanding a floor, or painting a fence, or washing and waxing a car. Those were mundane tasks that had a greater significance than he realized.

I think Jesus intended a similar thing with his wedding banquet instruction. It wasn't about the banquet. Ultimately, one's seat choice at a party is not terribly important. But choosing to be humble is. There's a spiritual advantage to going through life with humility. Better to choose the humble way now, and to be exalted later. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

And Jesus was a great example. He was born to a young, unwed mother, in a stable, in the little town of Bethlehem. He declared his purpose was to serve and not to be served. Just prior to the defining event of his life, he entered Jerusalem, not on a powerful horse, but humbly and riding on a lowly donkey. He humbled himself to the point of dying on a cross, but in the end, he was exalted.

It seems Jesus encouraged his followers to go through life with humility, because the future reward would be great. But I want to suggest there are some immediate rewards to choosing humility. Those humble chores led to the Karate Kid suddenly being able to defend himself. His heroic triumph won't come until the end of the movie, but his humility led to immediate benefits.

In our polarized social climate, humility can be a moderating force. I'll bet there are a lot of folks who stormed the capital on January 6th who now wish they had not been so sure of themselves. Some humility could have gone a long way toward avoiding behavior that was destructive to others and to themselves.

Humility can make us better listeners. To stop talking about one's accomplishments and exploits and to take the time to listen can help us to build deeper connections with others. Being a better listener can make one a more effective supervisor or to connect more closely with a partner or a child.

We grow, personally, through humility. I've realized that, in many situations, we have the choice to take on the role of the expert or the role of the learner. The people I tend to admire are people, no matter how brilliant they are or how much they know about a subject, they're always asking questions. Humility leads them to assume there's more they can learn.

There's an old story about an American philosophy professor who travels to the East to learn about the practice of Zen, from a Zen master. As they sit in the master's study, there is a teapot with two cups between them. As the professor describes the books he's read and his interest in Zen, the master pours him a cup of tea.

However, when the cup was full, he continued to pour until the tea spilled out over the edges of the cup. The surprised professor said, "Whoa, that's too much!" The Zen master replied, "That full cup is like your mind. In order to receive, you need to be empty. To approach life with humility provides openness and space to receive new ideas and new understandings.

In the second part of today's reading, Jesus continued his instruction by addressing those who would be hosts of a luncheon or a dinner. He said, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers 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."

Again, Jesus embodied this teaching with the way he lived his life. There are not too many stories in the Gospels describing Jesus hobnobbing with the cultural elite. Instead, he gets into trouble for sharing meals with sinners and tax collectors. He heals the crippled and give sight to the blind. He humbled himself by associating with those on the margins.

That's the story of our faith. The way of humility is the way of Christ. That means it's our way. It even has application for karate students. The one who humbled himself by sanding a floor, and painting offense, and waxing cars was ultimately triumphant.

I think the powerful thing about today's scripture is that, for Christians, a dinner party is not just a dinner party. It's an opportunity for the love and grace of God to be manifested. How we conduct ourselves in social gatherings and how we relate to others can be a sign of the kingdom of God breaking into our world. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The author of Philippians put it this way. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...(Philippians 2:5-9)"

