

August 28, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Musical Chairs"

Do you remember the children's game – musical chairs?

It was a standard at birthday parties before the invention of Bouncy Houses and guest clowns.

There was a circle of chairs numbering one less than the number of participants.

As music played everyone danced in a circle around the chairs.

When the music stopped you had to scramble to get a seat.

Someone was always left out – the loser.

This exercise was repeated until only one person is left.

I hated that game.

It produced in me an anxiety and stress that I can recall just talking about it.

It seemed to prey on our lowest common denominator – survival, completely missing any opportunity to display compassion or concern for those around us.

Is this not a metaphor for the society in which we live?

Doesn't everyone want to be the last one standing in the spotlight with the gold medal?

In our gospel this morning Jesus calls attention to how one selects their seat at a banquet.

Everyone wants to be seen.

Everyone wants to be in the best seat, most often closest to the source of power.

We are in the habit of equating visibility with esteem.

The more we hear about someone or read about them in the news, or follow their tweets, the more important we perceive them to be.

But Jesus is setting a very different standard.

Jesus is telling us that it is the humble who will be exalted and the exalted who will be humbled.

What do you think it means to be humble?

I drew on the scholars, poets and philosophers of old, looking for clues.

Simone Weil said that *'humility is attentive patience.'*

When we pay attention to other people, anticipate their needs, respond to their emotions, we move beyond ourselves.

When you are thinking about someone else, you cannot be thinking about yourself.

Thomas Merton said "*Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.*"

Do you feel authentic? Genuine?

One of the most important things we can do in life is to understand who we are and how we think.

I wrote a paper for one of my classes this summer that explored the concept of understanding.

I identified understanding as a verb – a process, rather than a noun-something we attain.

We are always learning new things about people, even about ourselves, and we must be cautious not to set up barriers for that new information to get in.

C.S. Lewis said:

"Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone."

This goes right back to Jesus' lesson this morning.

Where you sit and who you invite to your home reflects your attitude toward the world.

We had a spirited discussion at the Church Council last week regarding our evolving statement of welcome.

We were challenged to look beyond what some would call 'politically correct' language and to delve deeply into our Christian values to define what it was we were trying to do.

When I read the scripture for today, after last week's meeting, I thought, "Aha, this is what we are talking about.

Thank you Jesus for making things clear!"

We work on this quest for humility in community.

The 18th century philosopher Voltaire quipped "We are rarely proud when we are alone."

In community we are faced with living out the goodness we profess.

We can only love our neighbors if we interact with them.

Again, this is a work in progress.

None of us are perfect.

We are each one striving to live the best life possible.

We each want to be safe, healthy and secure.

There is nothing wrong with that.

What is important, from our Christian perspective, is that we realize that there are millions of people in the world who are not safe, healthy or secure and we exercise compassion toward those people.

Ernest Hemingway gives us this: *"There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self."*

When you are tempted to compare yourself to others, think of this.

You can really only be responsible for yourself.

There is little that you can do to change those around you – you can only change your own attitude toward them.

Carl Jung knew that we know ourselves best.

He said *"Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune."*

I would call that 'still, small voice' the Holy Spirit.

God formed us, God knows us, and God wants us to be our best selves.

The spirit comes to remind us that when God's breath gave us life God said, "It is good."

My colleague and friend, Father David Sellery, the priest at St. John's Episcopal Church, writes a weekly column on the lectionary readings.

This week his title was: *The Place of Honor*.

Using a sports metaphor (not something I usually employ) he said: *"Pride is Satan's curve ball. More souls have gone down swinging at that sucker pitch than any other. Satan throws it so well because it's the oldest trick in his bag. He's been practicing it since the Garden of Eden. Pride is the original sin that brought down Adam and Eve. It is the gateway sin that opens the door to a host of evil... from petty snobbery to genocide. That's why pride is the sin that Jesus identifies over and over for condemnation."*

My friends, Jesus invites us to the heavenly banquet where all are welcome, where the humble are exalted, where peace prevails.

Perhaps this banquet will not be held until we are gone, but why not practice for it during this mortal life.

Why not open our hearts and doors to every one of God's created beings and enjoy the benefit and rewards that come from such hospitality.

I wonder what it would have been like to play musical chairs as a cooperative game, where each person strove to make sure everyone else had what they needed – in this case a chair.

The winner, rather than being the one most exalted, would be the one most humbled.

That's a game I'm willing to play.