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On Honor

Text: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

There are many things that are necessary for us to have life. Food, drink, shelter, and medical care are among the most obvious. Without them we would soon die. But these things which are so necessary for bodily life still are not by themselves sufficient for having a good and fully human life. We have other needs, “needs of the soul” Simone Weil called them, which are also necessary. Without these needs being met, our bodies may indeed continue to exist, but they would be mere shells without any real person at home inside them. These needs of the soul are, Weil thought, needs that are analogous to our bodily needs, for just as the body withers and dies without its needs being met, so, too, the soul withers and dies in its hope for what is good without its essential needs being met. Now, she cautioned, one needs to be made aware that just as having our bodily needs met does not fulfill our spiritual destiny, so, too, meeting these needs of the soul is not the fulfillment of our spiritual destiny, either. Still, she argued, just as with bodily needs if these needs of the soul are not met, we will have a hard time getting to the point where we can reach that spiritual destiny, and find God in the secret place that God alone fills.

Weil once made a tentative list of these needs of the soul. They included such things as the need for truth and the need for order, the need to exercise initiative and the need to obey, the need to possess one’s own property and the need to own things in common with others. Now, among the various needs she listed she included the need for honor. A need for honor may seem a rather luxurious sort of need, rather like saying that we not only have a need for food, but a

need for steak. Weil was, however, I think right to include it for we each need to be honored. We need to believe that we count for something in the eyes of other people. This need for honor is at least the need to be respected by other people, the need to be treated fairly and the need to be treated as a fellow human being. But it is something more than these very basic things, too. It is also a need of ours to believe that we play a unique and special role in the life of the people among whom we live, and that they recognize it and pay it its due.

Honor has sometimes been called a false virtue, but when it is properly understood it is both important and legitimate. A world in which no honor was given to anybody would be a far poorer one morally. The fact is that those whom we honor are those who do us a great deal of good, and we ought at least to encourage them by giving them honor. What is even more important is that in giving them honor we are also giving them thanks, and we are holding them up as examples. The world needs examples and it needs heroes of all sorts for it is by such heroes and example that we chart our own courses in the waters of good and evil, and honor and shame. Thus we need humanitarians and selfless men and women to show that giving of oneself is important, more important than looking out for one's own hide. We need brilliant scholars and we need those who serve quietly and with patience. We need those who are heroes and we need those who have simply answered the call because it is important to do so. By honoring them for what they do we encourage them to continue their good works. By honoring them, we also encourage others to follow their example. So by giving honor we as a society say what is important and what is not, and teach our children what sorts of lives are worth pursuing.

Conversely, we need to recognize the fact that if we don't honor honorable people we make good acts seem senseless and futile to anybody who would attempt them. In a world where no honor is given, there would be few honorable people for there would be little reason for

anybody to think that honorable acts ever counted for anything. This is why it is such a heinous thing to try to take away somebody's honor, as sometimes happens in political campaigns. You don't have to like or vote for a candidate, but to take away his or her honor is to make things decidedly worse for everybody. A nation that encourages attacks on what it ought to honor and does not condemn those attacks outright as an attack on its most important ideals is a nation whose soul is beginning to wither. When this sort of thing happens, as Alexis de Tocqueville warned over one hundred seventy years ago, only scoundrels will present themselves for office since truly honorable people will avoid the argument.

Honor is not just a good, though, for those who get it; it is also good for those who give it, and a shame to those who don't give it when it is due. In giving honor we make ourselves sensitive to acts of goodness and beauty. We also show ourselves to be a people who are capable of gratitude and a people who in receiving the finest from somebody else are morally capable of making others feel that what they have done is worthy of human honor. In giving honor to those who deserve it, we ourselves are honorable. In failing to give it, or in taking it away from another or in clouding it, we act shamefully.

So in all these ways honor is important. And yet, there *is* clearly a danger in the notion of honor, a danger which has led many people to call it a false virtue. Too often the good of honor has been combined or confused with the sin of pride, and it becomes the occasion for resentment, spite, and even violence. I think here of the case of Alexander Hamilton, one of the greatest of the founding fathers, and without whom we surely would not have the constitution that we do, or the governmental stability, political and economic, that we do. Yet, despite the fact that he deserved to be honored, he was killed in a duel, an "affair of honor" as it was termed in those days, with the usually less than honorable Aaron Burr who thought his honor had been slighted..

Sometimes, too, while honor may be a legitimate need of the soul, many times we don't really deserve it. That has not always deterred us from taking it, though. Hardly worrying about the ethics of the situation, when the honor we think we need is not forthcoming we try to take it anyhow in order to give ourselves what we need. If others won't give it to us, we reason, we will try to give it to ourselves, for, to our minds, like food and clothing, we have a right to it. Thus on occasion badly mannered athletes who came in second place unexpectedly will try to argue that they really were the winners, and that the so-called winner didn't deserve the prize at all.

Another good example, though, of those who try to give honor to themselves comes from this morning's Gospel lesson in the case of the Pharisees whom Jesus so closely observed at dinner. Each one of them is undoubtedly dignified, yet as soon as it comes time to sit down at dinner they all become like children jockeying for the prime place at dinner, or crying "shotgun!" as they pile in the car, all in an effort so that everybody by noting where they sit will think them important and honorable. It was undoubtedly because of behavior like this that some hundreds of years later King Arthur invented the round table in order to short circuit childish attempts to gain honor. But moderns are not any better. News reports have often told us that in international negotiations months are often spent in dickering about the shape of the conference table and who is going to sit where. Some years ago, the House majority leader was willing to shut down the entire government for awhile because he hadn't gotten a good enough seat on Air Force One. As a result of all this concern about seats of honor, virtually all institutions, including governments, colleges, and churches designate somebody to be in charge of protocol to make sure that seating is correct. Yet, even with all this care taken it is not at all rare that somebody tries to sneak up to a higher place, as if they had just gotten a promotion because of the place they managed to secure in line. As a slightly ridiculous example of this, but proof nevertheless, I

can cite the behavior of a former colleague. In a college where I once taught, at the beginning of each semester the faculty processed in to the opening convocation, dressed in full academic regalia. The lineup was arranged by rank and seniority. Although that fact wasn't particularly obvious to those who were watching, that is the students, nor did the students much care about issues of faculty seniority, one colleague in particular inevitably cut in line further up to give herself what she thought was a promotion.

There are also, we might note, countless other examples of people trying to give themselves honor. Businesses constantly face the problem of what might be called "padded" resumes, instances where a person either tries to highlight some achievement that is in reality no achievement at all, or even outright falsifies information to appear more important than he or she really is. Even in death the tendency apparently doesn't stop. Funeral directors have often told me about outright lies that families insist go into obituaries.

Each one of these things is an attempt to gain honor. Now, we in kind moments might very well be sympathetic with these little peccadilloes when they cause no harm, for human beings need honor and sometimes grabbing it for oneself is the only way to get it. Unfortunately, however, too often in cases such as I have mentioned, it doesn't stop at a single incident, but positively becomes a greedy and insatiable hunger for honor. The reason it does so is not hard to find. For while we each need honor, it is real honor that we need and false honor rarely satisfies us. Feeling unfulfilled by our little lies, we remain hungry and therefore try continually to fill ourselves.

Yet we can never fill ourselves that way. And the reason why we cannot is simple, for honor is something that we can never give to ourselves. It can only be given to us by others. No matter how much we pad dossiers or present ourselves as eminent people or hustle to grab the

seat of honor, there is no real honor, no honor that really counts, until it is freely given by others. That's just the way it is with honor; that's what the word means.

This is precisely the point that Jesus tried to make with his disciples when he told them to avoid the seat of honor at a feast. As a practical matter, of course, his advice is wise for, as he points out, whenever you try to give yourself honor too often reality will slap you in the face and you will be humiliated by being asked to move down so that somebody else may take the place that you tried to usurp. But there is something more to his advice than even that. For by taking the lower seat in the first place one can actually give honor to another person. One can actually do something to feed the needs of the soul of another person. And for doing that, you yourself will deserve true honor.

It is in the suggestion that we deserve true honor by giving honor to others that Jesus' advice passes from the realm of mere good practical advice to the realm of spiritual truth. For while anyone who tries to grab honor on false pretenses is surely wrong, surely a good part of the reason that people try to grab honor is because all of us need it so desperately to live and yet nobody is ever willing to give it. Instead, they are all trying to take it. Everybody is jockeying for position, and thus it seem that if you want any honor whatsoever, well, then, you better grab it for yourself.

But Jesus saw things differently. He saw that what is truly honorable is the ability to give to others what they really need for life. It is for this reason that he also suggests to hosts that they ought not to invite friends, relative, and rich neighbors to their feasts. Doing so is not really to honor these people but too often simply bribing them so that they will invite you in return and give you honor. On the other hand, inviting the poor who need to be honored is an honorable thing. It is honorable not only because one invites them, but also because it does them the honor

of letting them be grateful, of letting them give you some honor, too.

What is truly spiritual about that, what is truly Christian about it, is that it makes honor into something of true value, no longer a false virtue or a masked version of the sin of pride. For in seeing that what makes one honorable is in giving honor to others is to see as God sees. For although God might very well expect to be honored for who he is, although he might force us to recognize his grandeur, he does not force the issue. Instead of remaining in high heaven, he became one of us, and indeed, one among us who serves others. By that he gave us a great honor – for imagine the honor of being served by God himself, which, is of course the case with everyone of us. Now that we are so honored let us then give him the honor of thanking him and praising him, and let us also be like him in serving and honoring others ourselves.