

September 1, 2013 The Last Place:

At the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. there is a wonderful exhibit which has drawn an enormous number of tourists over the years. On display is a section of a lunch counter and four stools from the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth store. In 1960, four African American students, all freshmen at the local North Carolina A & T College sat on those same stools and placed an order for a cup of coffee.

The employee behind the counter refused to serve them, citing store policy. Only "whites" were to be served at that counter. An uproar ensued. This event turned out to be one of the key moments in the history of civil rights in our country.

Turning to our gospel reading for today (Lk.14:1,7-14), let us bear in mind that the religious establishment of Christ's day were deeply suspicious of Jesus because of his association with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners. In today's readings, the Pharisees were observing Jesus closely, hoping to embarrass and discredit him (Lk. 14:1). But let us recall that Jesus observed others as well, especially the Pharisees. He found their custom of choosing the place of honor at table to be especially offensive.

Vanity and pride are surely obstacles in following the path chosen for us by God. Christ's words to "go and take the lowest place" at the banquet table is a pointed reminder to his hearers that humility is a virtue pleasing to our Lord. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk. 14:11).

In clerical circles, there is a humorous story told about an elderly Monsignor who was stopped by a state trooper for excessive speeding. At the time of the incident, the Monsignor was not in his priestly garb, and after an exchange of words, the priest was given a ticket. Now enraged, the Monsignor returned to the Rectory, where he met the associate pastor, who listened to his complaint. Although not recognizable as a priest when the ticket was written, the elderly Monsignor still complained that he had been unfairly treated. "Did he not know that I am a monsignor", he cried.

In other words, an exception should have been made for him because of his lofty status as a Monsignor. Oh, the dangers of vanity and pride!

The Late bishop Fulton Sheen once declared that "the humble man recognizes that titles, honor, position and glory could be lost in a moment. The only thing that is truly his own is his will...that is why it is the perfect gift, either to another person or to God."

One of the most obvious faults of a person who is puffed up with pride is that he or she is condescending and regards himself/herself as superior to others. But in the presence of God who can claim a place of honor?

If Christ were a customer in the Woolworth store that fateful day in 1960, he would certainly have joined the four African American students at the luncheon counter. And no doubt he would have been observed closely and harshly criticized for his behavior!

Let us ask ourselves if we walk humbly in the footsteps of our Lord. Would we dare to be in the company of those considered outcast by society?

Do we remember that Our Lord became the servant of all and willingly took the last place on the night before his death?

Amen.