

I came to Church in my Seer-Sucker suit today. I can't wear it after Labor Day Weekend. That's the rule! At Seminary, the last Wednesday Chapel service before Labor Day was what I used to call "Seer-Sucker Wednesday." You could always tell who the guys from the Carolinas and Virginia were that day, since we always hauled out our Seer-Sucker jackets. Like a uniform, we would don jackets for the pre-Labor-Day-service, the week before all those white and blue suits went back to the moth-balls!

And at Trinity Seminary it was a wonderful tradition too, as long as we remembered that a fashion statement wasn't the reason we were there. As long as we knew we were worshiping side-by-side with African men who didn't own a suit. These smiling black men would be there in their one, freshly laundered white shirt, joyfully lifting their hands in praise to the LORD God. And by the way, these tall, quiet, incredibly dignified men in their one clean shirt, or the stately, smiling women in the only dress they owned, these men and women from Tanzania, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda were invariably the handsomest people on campus. I mean, we Americans had to dress up to look good. The African students just *did*, regardless of what they were wearing!

I grew to so admire these African students during my time at Seminary. They always seemed to be so joyous! They had learned the great lesson the Psalm for today relates. Did you notice how this portion of Psalm 81 ends? "If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes...you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." (Ps.81:13-14, 16) My African classmates had learned how abundantly God yearns to bless his children. Tragically, it is in our nature to forgo those blessings in favor of the meager and transient gifts of this world. This is also the observation of Jeremiah in the Old Testament lesson for today. The Prophet notes how in its history, Israel is constantly eschewing God's offer of living waters, and exchanging this divine blessing for the tawdry remedy of hewing out leaky cisterns. (See Jer. 2:13) In the Old Testament world, there were two sources of preferred drinking water. You could dig down into the water table to bring well-water up from the aquifer. Or even better was to live in a community by an active river, which was always bringing a supply of new, fresh water to hand. This was known as מַיִם חַיִּים (pronounced "mayim khayem") in the Old Testament Hebrew of the Prophet Jeremiah, or "living water." A Far less desirable was to build a cistern to catch rain-water. But cisterns often collected silt and mosquito larvae, which meant that in the worst of cases, people ended up drinking liquid that was little better than sludge.¹ Yet, time and time again in their history, Israel had chosen the dubious goals of this world over the pure and infinite blessings that God longed to give a people who remained faithful to his Covenant with them. This is the same struggle Paul's friend Philemon has at a purely personal level. Paul is encouraging Philemon to receive the bounties of Christian blessing which would be the result of extending love and freedom to his slave Onesimus, in exchange for the pitiable benefits which would accrue to the wealthy man by keeping the new Christian brother, Onesimus in servitude to Philemon as his slave. Paul wants Philemon to have the same blessings that Jesus offers to the woman at the well, that of "living water." (See Jn.14:10)

God said, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." (See Ex.20:8) But have you noticed how we humans have taken that simple order, The Fourth Commandment which is supposed to lead us toward reverent worship of the LORD – have you noticed how we have taken that short directive and turned it into a rule to go only to a certain kind of place on Sunday, dressed only in a certain way, using only certain language, performing only certain rites? And woe be to the person who dresses, or speaks, or acts differently from the way that's been prescribed. It's that pride thing creeping in yet again!



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¹ See *ESV Study Bible* Footnote Jer.2:12-13, p. 1372 (Crossway Bibles, 2008, Wheaton, IL)

What had begun as a simple, humble, loving rule that God gave his people so that we might regularly remember and worship Him, this simple commandment has been twisted and contorted into something completely different: a product of human pride. And we read in today's Gospel passage that the people were watching Jesus like a hawk just to see if he would heal on the Sabbath; to see if He would break the rules. The Son of God himself had come into their midst, and the only thing the Pharisees were concerned with was to see whether or not Jesus was going to cover his mouth when he coughed or keep his elbows off the table. We humans just **love** to have rules by which we can judge people, rules with which we can prove to ourselves just how much better we are than others. It really all comes back to our absolute inability to remain the humble, devoted people God wants us to be. We always have to mess it up some way, somehow, don't we? We just can't resist looking into the mirror in order to see that we are indeed the fairest of them all. It's that pride thing again.

So, what's a body to do? Given our predilection to burn the toast every single time we are confronted with the need to be humble before each other – and before our God – given that we always seem to stub our toe on some kind of pride lying around, how are we supposed to keep from being the prideful creatures we are so bent on being? Well, the Gospel this morning gives us a wonderful guide star.

Jesus' instructions in Luke 14 about choosing our place at the banquet table is about choosing humility over humiliation.² It's a timeless piece of wisdom that those who modestly abase themselves in the presence of others are destined not only to avoid humiliation, but to become admired and exalted by the very people in whose presence they have acted humbly. And the poor of this world represent a treasured opportunity to acquire exactly this type of admiration and respect.

In Luke 14, Jesus says "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you." (Lk.14:14) "You know," Jesus is saying, "if you want to **really** be blessed in this world, perform acts of charity and love for people who cannot possibly pay you back." When you give help to those who cannot ever return the favor, when you train yourself to **that** kind of selflessness, then you will be on the right path, the path of true blessing! You see, a fundamental reason that the Christian faith requires us to be charitable to those in need is so **we ourselves** can be blessed. Thank God for poor people! Because we desperately **need** the poor among us.

Did you realize that each poor person you encounter can represent an incredibly effective way of getting right with God? When the author of Hebrews says, "Do not be afraid to welcome strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels unaware" (Heb.13:2), I'm not at all sure the writer's talking just about heavenly beings visiting us. Perhaps, the "stranger" that would be such an angel in the life of the one offering up this hospitality – maybe that angel was simply one of the destitute of that person's community. And in offering the gift of hospitable kindness, the person extending that charity is actually experiencing what it is like to have the Kingdom of God draw near. The poor among us really do represent some of the greatest blessings that you and I can have, if we only take the time to reach out to them. We don't extend the hand of outreach and mission just to help the destitute. We also do this so that we ourselves can know the joy, the great joy that is to be had in this kind of ministry. The poor of our community may well represent the presence of God among us. We need ministries of outreach you and I. In fact, we might need to be involved in performing this kind of ministry even more than the people who are receiving our charity. So do this for others. And do it for Jesus. But do it for yourself, too.

At various points in the Gospels, Our Lord promises us that we will always have the poor among us. (see Mk.14:7; Mt.26:11; Jn.12:8). Perhaps we should thank God for this. For it is in living with, ministering to, and communing with these who are in need that we can begin to experience that humble joy which, for a time, can put an end to our prideful feelings of arrogance and entitlement. Yes, indeed. There are angels, it would seem, in soup kitchens, if we will only take the time to look!

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² See footnote, ESV Study Bible, Lk.14:7-11. p. 1987