

**Yr. C, Proper 17**  
**September 1, 2019**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**— Words**

**Lessons: Proverbs 25:6-7**  
**Psalm 112**  
**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**  
**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

Somehow, Jesus got an invitation to a *nice* dinner party. It was in the home of a leader of the Pharisees. Jesus had a lot in common with the Pharisees. He was good at debating the meaning and application of the Law. People who like to debate these things enjoy sparring over dinner.

Well, on this night it all began before anyone even sat down to eat. According to St. Luke, the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. Apparently, he was also watching... *them*. Seeing how they jockeyed for the best seats, Jesus began to tell this story:

“When you are invited to a wedding banquet,” he said. “*Don’t sit down* at the place of honor.” (Well, that’s not even thinly veiled, is it?) Jesus continued, “Somebody more important than you might show up, and your host might have to ask you to move.” Now, wouldn’t that be awkward?

Does Jesus really care about dinner party etiquette? After all, he’s the guy who was always in hot water for the things he said *and did* around the table. Does he really care about what seems like nothing more than a *faux pas*? I think he does...in the most literal sense of that term—*faux pas*...*false step*.

The writer of Proverbs also mentioned this in his helpful hints for happy living. “Don’t put yourself forward in the presence of the king,” he writes. “Don’t angle to stand in the place you don’t belong. It’s better to be invited up rather than to be put (down) lower.”

I once vied for the best seat at ball room dancing lessons. My best friend in middle school was taking those lessons, so I did too. And we both had the exact same idea about which girl we wanted to sit next to. If only we had thought of Jesus (or even Proverbs,) we could have avoided the *faux pas*—the false step—and the embarrassment.

Our teacher helped us understand. She humbled us. She ushered us to the ‘lowest place,’ two seats at an empty table on the other side of the room.

It doesn’t seem as though *all* who exalt themselves end up getting humbled...as Jesus said they would, but when it happens, it is a beautiful thing, indeed!

How is it that we are so quick to recognize other peoples’ comeuppance, and yet we can be so blind to our own faux pas...our own false steps?

I believe the answer is theological. It runs deeper than social etiquette and awkward, embarrassing moments.

I believe our true selves—the essence of who we are created to be—can be summarized in St. Paul’s description of the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit living in us.

Our true selves are deeply rooted in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And God has already choreographed the ‘true steps’ of these virtues for us to learn...and practice...and perform to the glory of God and for the blessing of others.

God's choreography requires work and discipline, faith and trust. It is not easy to practice the 'true steps' of being ourselves the way God dreams for us, but when we do *these steps* lead us toward healthy relationships with God, with our neighbors, with the creation, and with ourselves.

We also have a false self—it is not our essence, but it is an ever-present, and tempting alternative. Our false self is animated by the very opposites of those fruitful virtues which grow from God's Spirit, working in us. The nature of our false self can be summarized with characteristics of fear, resentment, violence, impatience, rudeness, greed, deception, selfishness, and exploitation. When we pursue our false self, we are making false steps—faux pas—that lead us toward unhealthy relationships with God, with our neighbors, with the creation, and with ourselves.

True steps lead us toward a healthy self-*ness*. False steps lead us toward an unhealthy self-*ish*-ness. And so now we can see that Jesus is, in fact, interested in helping us avoid faux pas, because he is teaching and inspiring us to avoid false steps...and false selves.

This reshapes how we are able to think about what it means to live with humility. You see, humility is not thinking less *of* yourself, as much as it means thinking less *about yourself*. I think the faithful approach to humility actually means trying to think accurately about yourself—neither worse nor better than you truly are.

My experience is that people with a healthy self-concept are more apt to remain humble and true to themselves (and others). These people are more likely to value, and therefore, use their gifts to the glory of God and for the benefit of people besides themselves. A person who recognizes *and values* what it means to be 'marked as Christ's own, forever' is more likely to make true steps toward expressing the fullest potential person God created them to be...and also take a step back when they make false steps.

Among some Christians, the conventional wisdom is that humanity is destined for total depravity. This way of thinking leaves us feeling hopeless and fearful. This way of thinking can only instill anxiety about avoiding damnation.

I believe the biblical wisdom is that humanity is destined for Communion with God. This way of thinking invites us to feel hopeful and thankful. This way of thinking also inspires a desire to seek and share this divine promise.

At the end of today's Gospel passage, Jesus says, "Splurge on people who can't pay you back—the poor, crippled, lame, and blind, and you will be blessed." I guess the odds that we're being selfish is pretty small when there's nothing to gain. The chance we're being true to *God's dream* is pretty large when we are simply respecting the dignity of every human being—including ourselves.

Near the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus issues a similar challenge to us. He totally and absolutely identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the vulnerable, the sick, and the prisoner; and he says "just as you did something for the least of these, you did it to me. All the humble sheep who actually did these things end up exalted. These people were true to themselves and to the dream God had for them and their neighbors who were in need.

Then Jesus makes his point even more forcefully for those who are blind to such things. Once again, he totally and absolutely identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the vulnerable, the sick, and the prisoner; and he says "just as you did *not* do something for the least of these, you did not do it for me."

And all those ‘self-exalted goats’ end up being humbled. You see, those people had already walked away from their true selves. They persisted in the false steps, the faux pas, which are at odds with the dream God had choreographed for them and their neighbors in need.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews counsels us in these same matters, challenging us to take true steps toward our true selves with a little hint that we might just be pleasantly surprised by how sneaky God is: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The other virtues enumerated in this letter match the fruitful virtues of God’s Holy Spirit, working in us. Remember those in prison. Avoid the love of money. Be content with what you have. Imitate the faith of the faithful. Offer a sacrifice of your praise (and thanksgiving) to God. Don’t neglect to do good every chance you get. Share what you have. Such things as this are pleasing to God...because they are the true steps which God has choreographed for us to learn and practice and perform.

Yes, Jesus cares about our faux pas, our false steps, because Jesus is continually calling us into this dance of God, this dream of God, in which all are restored to unity with God and one another through Christ.

It is not easy, but it is reliably true and good and beautiful.

Amen.