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**LOWER EDUCATION**  
LUKE 14:1, 7-14  
**A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL**  
**ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 2025**  
**BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

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The lowest place in the Chapel building or the last place you might visit by chance or even want to visit by choice is what some call ‘the basement.’ When people say ‘Duke Chapel’ they are not often including or thinking of the basement. But I like to be more generous and loving than that and so I call it ‘the lower level.’ It’s a place that is out of sight and out of mind for most people (I’m not including the Chapel Choir because they’re there all the time!). You don’t really hear anything about the lower level, nor do you hear anything from the lower level. But the lower level hears what’s happening in the upper level, upstairs here, even now, through electronic speakers. Or, during the week, you might experience an impromptu organ recital, for instance, through the ceiling downstairs, even while in staff meetings, but the sound doesn’t travel up in the other direction.

To be honest, the lower level is not as aesthetically pleasing compared to this higher level we are in now, especially when you have a section of the lower level in the lobby area and a hallway corridor where the ceiling is only 6’6” high due to the HVAC ductwork. Can you imagine current or former Duke basketball players walking down there? Well I’ve seen it, and it is a sight to behold! ESPN should capture that! But despite all of this, with its structural and aesthetic challenges, it’s important to remember that people work down there and exist down there in the lower level—there are numerous offices of chapel and religious life staff down there. Ministry with students and others happens there with Bible studies and conversations around meals in the kitchen area or lounge. The Congregation at Duke Chapel holds after-service fellowship times there (I love the ice cream!). Students study and may nap there (as Bruce Puckett did many years ago as a student). All sorts of meetings occur there. Music practice happens there. There is life, human life, in the lower level, the lowest place, the last place you might want to visit.

It’s understandable why the higher level, where we are, receives all of the attention when we speak of the Chapel. It’s beautiful in so many ways. Awe-inspiring. “The great towering church” as Mr. Duke called it. It feels sacred and speaks of the sacred. The high vaulted ceilings call us higher. Going higher seems to always be the goal in life. We have inherited an idealized hierarchy of progression in which the higher you are, the better you are supposed to be; and although I’m up high, perched in a pulpit, that is no guarantee that the sermons will be better.

Even the term ‘upper hand’ is more positive and indicates an advantage. Students don’t get accepted into Duke because they have low scores but high scores and are high achievers. No one points to their lowest grade or lowest point in life as something to be proud of and emphasize in their college or job applications. We are even in a context of learning known as ‘higher education’ indicating a level higher than secondary or elementary schools.

But in the gospels, there is a lower education. That’s what I want talk about today at the start of this academic year—lower education. I want to highlight the low. That’s what Jesus does. Jesus “noticed how the guests chose the places of honor” at a meal rather than the lowest place, that is, the last place they would want to be. So he tells them when they’re invited to a banquet to “go and sit down at the lowest place” because “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He wants us to become educated in the lowest place, which is where you receive a lower education. Sit down. Be humble. At tables and elsewhere. Jesus exalts humility. And humility doesn’t mean to be cowardly or weak, as some may think. One of the great liberators in ancient biblical times Moses, as we hear in the Book of Numbers, “was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3) He was humble and look what he did.

Humility even made a debut during the halftime show at this year’s Super Bowl, where hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar performed a piece from his 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning album. The piece was called “HUMBLE” in all caps.

Some of the refrain lyrics of the song are: “Tell 'em, be humble/Sit down/Be humble/Sit down...” “Down” is the operative word. Even though so many of us want to be upwardly mobile, and go higher, “down” moves us closer to the ground, which is where we are from as humans. The words “human” and “humble” have the same linguistic roots in the Latin word “humus” meaning ‘earth’; the humble person has his or her feet down on the earth, the dirt, the very dirt God used to create us, making it our texture. If that doesn’t humble you, I don’t know what will! We are dirty. We are dusty.

Yet we struggle with sitting down, going down, getting low and choosing the lowest place. No parent is putting a bumper sticker on their car that says, “My child learned humility at school this month.” We relish higher education, not lower education. But as an ancient Jewish text teaches, “When you turn proud, remember that a flea preceded you in the order of Divine Creation.”

But I think I know why we struggle with humility and being humble and with the lowest place, even as disciples of Jesus. To be humbled, sometimes means we have to eat humble pie. And “humble pie” has interesting linguistic roots and social connections. In the fourteenth century, “the numbles” were the name given to the heart, liver and entrails of animals, especially of deer. By the fifteenth century, this word “numbles” had become “umbles.” Umbles were used as an ingredient in pies, and the first record of “umble pie” in print is as late as the seventeenth century. The word “humble” means “of lowly rank” or “having a low estimate of oneself,” and umble pies were known to be eaten by those in a humble lowly situation like the poor; from this, we get “humble pie.”

And so I think we don’t necessarily want to be humble or umble or eat ‘humble pie’ because perhaps we don’t want to associate with the poor and be viewed as a lower class. The bias against the lowest in society is so merciless that some would rather put them in cages or round them up and remove them from public view as if that erases them from the slate of humanity. It’s like the lower level of the Chapel—we may not even know it exists, out of sight, out of mind; but there are people sitting, working, living, and napping in the lowest place. Yet somehow only the highest accolades or higher ranks or highest paying jobs often matter.

You learn otherwise in lower education. Jesus teaches, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends [or besties] or your brothers and sisters or your relatives [or teammates] or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return to go and eat with them at the Washington Duke Inn, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Do not feast on people without power but rather feast with them. Look low. Go low. Sit down together in the dust of our shared humanity. It’s like Jesus is quoting Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus,” which is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me...”

Jesus is giving us a lower education at the beginning of this new academic year. Lessons in an exalting humility, a kind of humility that seeks to lift others up, meaning an education that humanizes and never dehumanizes another person because of economic or health or social status. It’s a humility in touch with what it means to be human down on the ground, and it chooses to get low and engage the lowly like the poor and other outcasts. It’s a humility that embraces the lower level, the lowest place, the last person you might want to see or the last place you might want to be.

And yet it is a place you need to be because it is where you will find your end. Interestingly enough, the word ‘lowest’ –or in some English translations ‘last’— in this parable is the Greek word ‘eschaton’ meaning ‘the end,’ referring to the last things or the end of time, where we get the word ‘eschatology’ from. Go down to the last, the end, where we find our end. Of course, this is where Jesus wants us to recline in the end at his future banquet table. Lower education will lead us to our eternal end at last. And in the last, the last days, the last place, is where we belong and where we find the lowly Christ, the one who was poor, homeless, a migrant, a servant of all from the lowest place.

He was born in a lowly manger, which is a feeding trough for animals. He was infant holy, infant lowly. He was high but emptied and humbled himself and came low, so low that he came in the form of a slave. He knew what it was to be lower. He knew what it was to be last in society. His human form was cruciform shaped by the lowliness and loneliness of suffering and death. To be formed by Christ in this lowest place is to be reformed and transformed through a lower education that is an education in genuine humility, in the company of the oppressed.

There are many degrees from higher education represented in this room, but the toughest lessons learned and lived are in lower education. It is truly lifelong learning because it will take a lifetime to truly learn how to get lower and lower and lower, closer and closer to the dust where we will return. And in the lowest place, in that dusty earthy place, is where you'll experience the last embrace of God, in the eschaton, the end, with a final lesson of never-ending love. At the last, at the low place around the Lord's banquet table, we will meet our Triune Tutor named Love whose eternal song has always been:

*Take me to the alley  
Take me to the afflicted ones  
Take me to the lonely ones  
That somehow lost their way*

*Let them hear me say  
I am your friend  
Come to my table  
Rest here in my garden  
You will have a pardon*  
(Gregory Porter)

Lower education; it's an education in unconditional love that tastes like humble pie. I highly recommend that you pursue it this year.