

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, August 31, 2025**

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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## Recover Agency

For a long time, like many others, I was persuaded of the absolute, almost ‘sacred’ value of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations in **1948**.

Born from the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II, it proclaimed that all humans are “born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and affirmed freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and protection against torture, slavery, and discrimination. Though not legally binding, it has shaped over seventy constitutions, inspired legal battles, and advanced a culture of rights worldwide.

It was tempting to believe that universal consensus around the culture of rights would only grow stronger, although even early on, some warned that while powerful, it was also vulnerable to abuse.

Indeed, today we have to acknowledge that often we find ourselves entangled in a maze of competing claims, where simply saying “I have the right” is supposed to settle the matter. Even more ominously, we are becoming more and more powerless against the denial of rights we were taking for granted. I am in disbelief when I see how fundamental rights – such as due process, free speech, and protection against discrimination or excessive force – are now being denied, manipulated, and emptied of their meaning.

This has led me to think that however noble, practical – and however often effective in the short run – the culture of rights cannot be the last word for building a truly just and healthy society.

I owe to Fr Mark to have aroused my curiosity one a year or so ago, when he told me: “You should definitely read Simone Weil’s *The Need for Roots*” – a highly original essay written in 1943 (so five years before the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). Simone Weil claims that society must be built not on rights but on *obligations*. Rather than everyone claiming “This is my right”, she proposed that our common humanity should inspire in us the sense that we owe to others to treat them with respect, attention, and affirmation.

At first, this argument unsettled me. But gradually I understood that Simon Weil has a point, especially in light of today’s Gospel.

For all we know the person who claimed the place of honor at the meal Jesus was invited to might have had a right to it. Nothing is said about the worthiness or unworthiness of the guests at this banquet. The parable though warns us against entitlement: I might think that I have the right to a certain level of

recognition, but more often than not I am the worst judge of what is owed to me. The very need to assert status and honor might signal that I am not so certain about whether I truly deserve them – besides exposing myself to ridicule because it can be so easily denied, whether justly or unjustly. Conversely, nothing is more affirming than other people's or the host's unsolicited recognition: "Friend, move up higher" (Luke 14.10).

Now you might understandably object that getting assigned a less dignified place at a banquet is not the same thing as being discriminated against because of race or gender or being denied due process when imprisoned – and that we can't rely on other people's sense of obligation alone to prevent these immensely harmful wrongs. Yet, everything that is happening in the world today warns us that we can't count on other people's or the state respecting our rights either. Simone Weil's and the Gospel's point is not that we should give up rights but that something much more fundamental is needed as the basis for an authentically fair society.

The obvious question then becomes this: by putting obligations before rights are we depriving people of *agency*?

Are we saying, for example, that Martin Luther King was wrong to fight for equal rights?

Let us start by remembering that King's message and method went well beyond advocating equal rights. For him the only lasting solution for racism was the Beloved Community, a society where everyone is moved from within to honor and support others. Hence his commitment to non-violence: resisting injustice without hatred affirmed the sacred worth of both oppressed and oppressor. Simply compelling others to respect rights goes only so far and can be revoked as soon as society becomes unable or unwilling to enforce them. Changing hearts is the only lasting solution.

So back to whether talking about obligations rather than rights deprives us of agency, there is a sentence in the Gospel that might bring some clarity. Jesus says that "those who humble *themselves* will be exalted." (Luke 14.11).

Jesus is not talking about being humbled by others, but of us 'humbling ourselves', that is us proactively devoting ourselves to serving and loving others. It is not something we endure, but that we choose (there is our agency) – just as Martin Luther King chose the path of non-violence, which was heavily criticized initially, but succeeded where everything else had failed before.

This sentence in fact describes Jesus' own trajectory, memorably captured by Paul's letter to the Philippians (2.6-11): Jesus was God, nobody more than him was entitled to the first place at the banquet. Yet he decided not to seize upon this 'right', but he humbled himself, choosing the path of a love that led him to make himself the servant of every person: "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22.27). This was the way he touched the heart of humanity like nothing else before. This is how he initiated an irresistible wave of change that some might find too slow, and yet is making a tangible, massive, unheard-of difference in the world.

Very frustratingly sometimes, Jesus wants us to opt for the long, some would say *unbearably* long game.

We can be forgiven for feeling powerless, helpless, deprived of agency in a time like ours. The merciless pendulum of history seems to be swinging and taking us backwards. Our naïve assumption that the progress of human rights was irreversible is threatened. In many of our Western democracies people feel

gaslighted, bullied into hiding below the radar, trying to weather what we hope might be only a passing storm.

It is at times like these though that we might be able to hear the Gospel anew and more profoundly than before.

Jesus reminds us where our most powerful *agency* really lies: “those who humble *themselves* will be exalted.” (Luke 14.11).

Embracing the path of humility does not mean laying low.

It means looking beyond ourselves and our safe circles of friends:

“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, but you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous”. (Luke 14.13f).

Even talk about ‘obligations’ is not enough for those who want to follow this path.

The agency we are given by Jesus goes much further.

The banquet Jesus is talking about is our life.

At this banquet we are not the guests who anxiously hope to be assigned a decent spot.

At this banquet we are the hosts.

Of us it is asked to acknowledge, recognize, affirm, advance, and support our neighbors.

Of us it is asked to have an eye for all those who are in need, left on the margins, discriminated against.

Of us it is asked to overcome resentment even against those who happen to be the oppressors right now.

We win not by coercion but by conversion, that is by committing ourselves to the long labor of changing the hearts by embracing the path of humility.

In the end, if being Christians means to follow Jesus then we have no choice but to go at his pace – and yes, he leads us in the longest of games: not just the game of rights, nor even that of obligations, but the game of unconditional love.