

Luke: 1, 7-14

14 On one occasion when Jesus † was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

Humility and Hospitality

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, „Give this person your place,“ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, „Friend, move up higher“; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. ”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

There are times when Jesus hits us with stories that „uncover“ our habitual and socialized way of doing things. First, Jesus presents what we might call „normal“ behaviour. Then he contrasts the „normal“ behaviour with what we might call, „kingdom“ behaviour“ as in „kingdom of God. It is behaviour, which, as Christians, we should model. Today“s Gospel is a good example of a story which „uncovers.

It is a very basic set of two parables. Now when Jesus tells us that he is going to tell a couple of parables, we know immediately that it is not the details of the story which matter so much as the underlying meaning. So, we are meant to look for the underlying meaning of the two parables Jesus tells.

To set the scene, we are told that on one occasion, Jesus goes to the house of someone prominent in the community, a leader of the Pharisees, one of the key political groups in the Jewish temple. And, we are also told that they, the Pharisees are watching him very closely. When Jesus noticed how the guests were choosing the places of honour in which they sat, he told them a parable.

When you are a guest at a wedding banquet, he said, do not look for the place of honour in which to sit. Because, someone more distinguished than you might need that spot. Just think, then, how embarrassed you would be if your host asked you to move in order to let that more distinguished person take your place! Then, in disgrace, you – publicly – would have to get up and move to the lowest place.

Instead, if you had first sat in the lowest place of honour, you would be pleasantly and publicly surprised if your host came to you and asked you to go and sit in a place of honour.

Just think, Jesus said, that when you try to go to the head of crowd, you, in fact will be sent to the back of the crowd. And if you go to the back of the crowd, you will be sent to the head of the crowd.

Of course, this is a great paradox for us; because we are programmed-, at least most of us are – to associate, if we can, with the important people, the famous people, the powerful people. Humility, for most of us is a life-long struggle.

There is a story which TV personality, Tom Brokaw tells. He was wandering through Bloomingdale's in New York one day, shortly after he was promoted to co-host on the Today Show. The Today Show was a pinnacle of sorts for Brokaw after years of work, first in Omaha, then for NBC in Los Angeles and Washington. Finally, he was feeling very good about himself. He noticed a man watching him closely. The man kept staring at him and finally, when the man approached him, Brokaw was sure he was about to reap the first fruits of being a New York television celebrity.

The man pointed his finger and said, "Tom Brokaw, right?" "Right", Said Brokaw.

"You used to do the morning news on KMTV in Omaha, right?" "That's right", said Brokaw, getting set for the accolades to follow.

"I knew it the minute I spotted you," the fellow said. Then he paused and added, "Whatever happened to you?"

The first shall be last and the last first

The second parable is not about a „guest“ attending a meal. It is about the person giving the banquet – the host.

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, Jesus says, do not invite your family or business associates or neighbours with the motive that they will repay you by inviting you to a lunch or dinner at their house. Instead, you should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. You should invite people you know will not be able to repay you.

Talk about a paradox. Once again, we are programmed to associate with people we know, love, work with, and get along with. We are not programmed to associate with people who are in a different class, who have needs we cannot even begin to understand, let alone deal with. Sit next to a drug addict or a panhandler or someone who crippled severely by MS or Lou Gehrig's disease or AIDS? A very difficult thought for most of us! But, Jesus, through the medium of a parable says that this is „kingdom“ behaviour. This is what it means to be Christian. To welcome and embrace those who are at the back of the crowd, who are needy, who are in need of justice and compassion. This is what it means to be programmed for „kingdom“ behaviour.

In Jesus' world, the people of the temple and synagogue were programmed much like us. These were the people who were watching Jesus and condemning him as a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes. You will notice that many of the stories in the bible have Jesus eating with people. And in many of these stories, Jesus is eating with one or more of the above. Eating with drunkards, gluttons, tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, lepers and crippled people. In that society, it was a matter of shame when you saw someone, like Jesus, a rabbi, eating with the likes of these people. Not very different from our society.

The meal which we share every Sunday at St. John's, much like Jesus did, is our Eucharist. We break bread and drink wine together as we share each other's joys and sins. When we share the Eucharist, we are both host and guest. We are both the guests of honour and the lowly guest; we are equal before God and we are not here in order to have others notice us or do something for us. We are expressing „kingdom“ behaviour. In expressing that behaviour, it is our obligation to encourage and bring to this meal, those in our community who are the drunkards, the gluttons, the tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes, the sick and the dieing.

Sometimes, the stories of Jesus, like the parables in today's Gospel reading, are paradoxical and uncover us for what we are, just as the following story illustrates:

A pagan once asked Rabbi Joshua ben Qarehan, "Why, of all things, did God choose the humble thorn bush as the place from which to speak with Moses?"

The rabbi replied: "If he had chosen a carob tree or a mulberry bush, you would have asked me the same question. Yet it is impossible to let you go away empty-handed. That is why I am telling you that God chose the humble thorn bush – to teach you that there is no place on earth bereft of the Divine Presence, not even a thorn bush. "

I might add – not even the drunkard, the glutton, the prostitute, the sick and the crippled. Not even you and I

-Gary Hamblin

Pentecost 14 Year C

Sources: New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; Fred B. Craddock et. al., *Preaching Through The Christian Year*. Herbert O'Driscoll, *The Word Among Us*; William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*.