

TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [Year C]

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

Psalm 68

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a

Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the Gospel passage today we see Jesus, as we often do in Luke's version of the Good News, eating with people. Here he is the guest of one of the leaders of the Pharisees gathered with others for a Sabbath meal. He uses the occasion to teach a lesson about real humility and gracious hospitality.

“...do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host... When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors,...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed because they cannot repay you...”

While reflecting on this passage I was reminded of childhood and our family gatherings for Christmas Eve or other special occasions. As children, my cousins and I were relegated to the places of humility not honor. We more than likely got our food first, a definite plus, but we were sent to the basement to sit at card tables when there was a large group gathered or to the kitchen table when there was a smaller group together; the adults and our older cousins, however, were either at the Dining room table or at least upstairs. It is different at our family gatherings today, more egalitarian, the young ones are still first in line for the food but we all sit together.

Jesus offers us a challenge in today's gospel, an important lesson. He consistently uses the image of a wedding feast, a banquet, as a metaphor for the fullness of the kingdom, for heaven, for salvation. The point of this parable is, first, that no one, no matter how highly they may think of themselves, or how virtuous they are ever earns a place at the banquet. We are not saved by our own merit but by the graciousness and generosity of God.

Jesus is really making a point about authentic humility. It is not a virtue that becomes apparent in our lives by reason of false self-effacement; rather, it is the product of recognizing and affirming the truth about ourselves. All that we have, all that we are, all that we are capable of, even our place at the table is gift from God. The humility Jesus called for the Pharisees to acknowledge and that He wants for us demands that we recognize what we truly are, God's creatures, utterly dependent on God.

Humility also demands that we accept and rely on God's judgment rather than our own as to who and what is valuable, even if that judgment is in contradiction to our own. That is the second point Jesus makes in this Gospel passage. It is an invitation to practice genuine hospitality. Jesus prefers that as hosts we invite those who cannot repay us with a return invitation or with places of honor at their tables. I remember an incident from several years ago – I had worked for many months with a young couple, from the parish I was then at, in preparation for their marriage. I was invited to their wedding reception and when I arrived I was seated at a table at the very back of the reception hall. Well, in my own foolishness I thought surely I was deserving of a better place, a place of honor at this reception. Talk about a messed up sense of entitlement. Of course I would not have said anything to them for it's embarrassing enough to even realize and acknowledge that I harbored those thoughts. This Gospel is well worth my reflection. Luke reminds us that Jesus broadens the circle of those who belong at the table. We are not to think of others as inferior nor of ourselves as superior. We are all urged to seek God's blessings rather than honored places at earthly meals.

The feast for all peoples is an ancient Israelite image of peace and communion in God found often in the Old Testament. From the prophet Isaiah we hear: *“On this mountain the Holy One will make for all peoples a feast of rich foods and choice wines...”* (25:6)

The kind of feast referred to in this prophecy is that to which everyone is invited and all who come in thirst or hunger will be satisfied. This is a feast where everyone belongs; rich and poor, young and old, people of all colors, of all ways and walks of life who are to sit with one another, separated by nothing.

The Eucharist we gather here to celebrate anticipates the Messianic banquet that takes place where the fullness of life is realized in the kingdom. So the advice of Jesus to the assembled dinner guests in the gospel about place at table and who belongs should apply to us and to our everyday lives.

Unfortunately we live in an imperfect and incomplete world where these ancient visions of God's abundance flowing free of charge to all remain just that, visions rather than full realities. We live in a world where many are still caught in a web of poverty and homelessness; in a world where war and unrest disturbs the lives of so many on either side of the conflict; a world where the desire for power and honor and prestige yet takes precedence over equality and mutual respect; a world where prejudice and fear still win out over shared human dignity, trust, and love; a world where there is still great separation between people and religions rather than full unity.

Each Eucharist then that we celebrate stands as a challenge to us, a challenge to make the Word of God come alive in our everyday. Each Eucharist is also the means of continuing to nurture in ourselves the desire to keep working to make real the dream of our patron, St. Katharine Drexel; a dream born of her faith and her love of Christ. She firmly believed that everyone belonged together at the Eucharistic table in places of both humility and honor. Her life of service, her example of a humble life lived in union with Christ calls to us today to live the Word of Jesus that we hear in the Gospels and to do what he did, afford hospitality to all and strive for greater unity, justice, peace, and love - all to the honor and glory of God.

[Ideas developed and reworked from: Seasons in the Word, Liturgical Homilies Year C by John Sandell; Liturgical Press, 2003 and "Sunday by Sunday" Vol.16, No. 50 by Joan Mitchell, CSJ]