

Proper 17, Year C

August 29, 2010

Luke 14:1,7-14

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. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "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; 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. 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." 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. But 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, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

[I did not prepare a sermon this weekend, as we were worshipping with the Lutherans – as we do every year on the last Sunday of August – and it was the Lutheran pastor's turn to preach. But here is a sermon on today's Gospel from several years back...]

Several years ago, a *Bloom County* comic strip appeared in the newspaper just before Thanksgiving Day. In that strip, Milo, the precocious, politically active youngster, has been asked to offer the blessing for the Thanksgiving meal. The family is ceremoniously and soberly seated around the table, which is laden with food. "Dear God," Milo begins, "we thank you for this meal, and for this turkey, which was once a living, breathing creature, brave and free, capable of nurturing its young with almost human affection. Anyway, it's dead, and we're going to eat it now. Amen." Of course, he gets booted to the back porch in no time flat; this *isn't* exactly what his family had in mind to begin a warm, festive holiday meal. He's spoiled the mood, not to mention their appetites. (quoted by The Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence in *Lectionary Homiletics*, 1998)

What Milo did is not that far from what Jesus does at the Pharisee's dinner table in our Gospel. Jesus' words were a social offense of a similar magnitude, and, strangely, they carried a somewhat similar meaning. For Milo – unwittingly, perhaps – points out the stubborn nature of sin, so pervasive that it permeates even that essential activity which sustains our lives: eating. In order just to live, we must kill; such is the state of Fallen creation. We have not yet attained to the

Kingdom of God, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and the lion eat straw like the ox (Isaiah 11). We are dependent on *other* lives to sustain **our** lives, and this very fact of nature *should* keep us from any lofty and prideful sense of our independence, keep us from arrogance and conceit, keep us humble, and make us profoundly grateful. Our very lives depend on the lowly turkey – and no *less*, therefore, do they depend on God, and on one another. We say grace at a meal in humble gratitude for the turkey or the cow or the carrot or the potato which gave its life that we might live, and for the God who sustains us both with food and with divine Spirit. We *say* grace with a profound sense of the grace we *receive*.

At least, that is the way Jesus believes it *should* be. But that is *not* what he sees at the meal in the Pharisee's home. Instead of a profound sense of grace received, he sees people jockeying for places of honor. And instead of a guest list which reflects gratitude to God and dependence upon each other, Jesus sees a guest list designed to bring honor to the host.

Now it is important to recognize that the people invited to the banquet are *not* bad people! They are typical, upstanding citizens of the day, whom **we** would *respect* if we had lived in that day and age. Indeed, *we* would probably have felt very at home at this dinner party. The guests are cordial and interesting, the meal is delicious, the conversation stimulating. *We* might well have been among the first to raise our glass to toast a wonderful party, a courteous host! Indeed, if *we don't* see how **at home** we would be at this Pharisee's meal, we are likely to miss the message of Jesus' teaching.

"They were watching him closely," our first verse states. Jesus was being thoroughly scrutinized – like some of *us* might scrutinize a member of our bridge club, or our church, or of *another* church, or the *pastor* of another church, scoping them out to see if they pass muster, ready to cast a black ball if they make one mistake. For you see, **we** are members of the *in-group*! We have paid our dues over the years, earned the right to sit at table in the company of our exclusive group.

And so we sit in judgment.

And it is not only in judgment of the *newcomer*, or of the person who has once upon a time offended us: we also discriminate among our *friends*, playing an interior game of one-upsmanship. "I'm glad I'm not like good ol' Sam!" we might say to ourself. "Why, the poor guy (bless his heart!) is such a lousy father, his kids are always misbehaving; while *my* kids, on the other hand, are straight-A students!" "I'm glad I'm not like Suzy!" we might think. "I mean, I know I have my faults, but they're *nothing* compared to hers!" We would never say these things *out loud*, of course, or even *admit* to ourselves that we **have** these thoughts. But let us not kid ourselves that *we* would be too *enlightened* and *virtuous* to be concerned about "who is greater".

Our value system is simply **different** from that of the 1st Century Mediterranean world. *We* are not so concerned with **honor**; quite the opposite! **Our** society places high value on *humility* – or at least outward *displays* of humility. Yet the dynamics are the same: we can be equally as prideful of our own *humility* as people of the 1st Century were of their honor. Instead of jockeying for seats of *honor* at a dinner party, we might want to impress people with our *knowledge*, or our *wit*. Or we might want to appear to be the quiet, detached, wise observer. We might even take pride in our own lowliness, our own humility! How many times have we looked down our noses at those “rich people” who live in mansions and drive luxury cars? Is that not really putting ourselves and our own “lowliness” *above* those rich people? How often do we hear Jesus say, “those who humble themselves will be exalted”, and think to ourselves, “That’s *me*, by Jove! **I’m** humble!”

Jesus sees it all, our text tells us. The guests may be “watching Jesus closely”, but Jesus is watching *them* even **more** closely. The difference is that, unlike the Pharisees, who were watching for Jesus to *slip up* in regard to the law or traditions, Jesus’ x-ray eyes watch the heart. Jesus sees that the meal is not at all about gratefully partaking of the food God has so graciously provided – the meat which some animal has forfeited its life to supply, the gift of each other’s company (not to mention the gift of Jesus’ *own* presence among them). Rather, he discerns, the meal is about trying to get a leg up on someone else.

It shall *not* be so, Jesus sternly states, at the **heavenly** banquet, of which *every* meal (and certainly the Eucharist we soon share) should be a foretaste. The place of honor *cannot* be earned or grasped at; it is **given** by God.

John Brodie, the former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, was once asked why a multi-million-dollar player like him should have to hold the ball for field goals and points after touchdown. “Well,” replied Brodie, “if I didn’t, it would fall over.” *That’s Kingdom* thinking! Kingdom thinking realizes that my life is not about me.

My life is not about me; your life is not about you. Rather, we are each caught up in the incredible gift of **God’s** Life, the blessing of participating in the ongoing creation and redemption of this wonderful, awesome, yet fallen world. We are caught up in the grace of God’s ceaseless outpouring of love and forgiveness.

AMEN