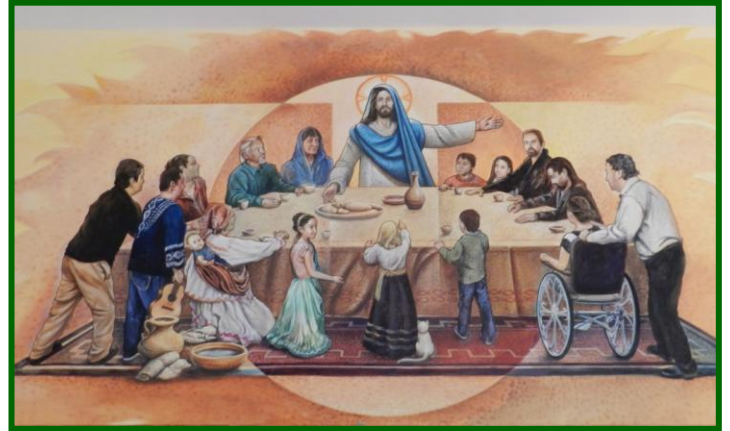


Sunday, August 28, 2016
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 14:1, 7-14



1 On a Sabbath Jesus went to dine at the house of one of the leading Pharisees, and the people there were observing him closely.

7 He told a parable to those who had been invited, noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table: 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor. A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, 9 and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place. 10 “Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’ Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

12 Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. 13 Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; 14 blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

BACKGROUND

In last week's gospel, Jesus was asked how many would be saved. His response focused not on how many would be saved; but on who God saves. The gospel concluded with Jesus stating that in the final realm of God... “Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:30) You may also recall that someone in the crowd reminded Jesus that they had eaten and drank with Jesus as a way to claim a relationship with Jesus that entitled them to be counted among those who would be saved. The importance of table fellowship in this culture is part of the cultural background for the gospel for this Sunday.

Immediately after last Sunday's text Luke then describes how some Pharisees came to Jesus and urged him to leave the area because Herod was seeking to kill him. Jesus mourns for the people of Jerusalem in a way that hints of his own approaching rejection and death. Luke then returns to Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees, and he describes an incident where a leading Pharisee invites Jesus to a dinner at his house. That account is the gospel text for today.

At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were a lay group who tried to observe faithfully their traditions. Their strict adherence was an expression of their desire for a spiritual renewal of Judaism. By the time the gospels were being written, the Pharisees had earned a more formal role as religious leaders, which is reflected in the gospels. The fact that Jesus is being invited to the home of one of these leaders for a Sabbath meal would suggest that this Pharisee looked upon Jesus as an equal. The meal would be an opportunity to strengthen their relationship. In this culture, Jesus' acceptance of this invitation would normally be construed as acknowledging the implied relationship.

Some might suggest that the fact that Jesus was being watched might indicate that the invitation had been extended to Jesus with malicious intentions, but in fact, the behavior of every guest was carefully observed. The parable that Jesus tells suggests how concerned people of the day were with who was invited, where each guest was seated, and the comparative rank each held in the eyes of their host and the other guests. In this society, these gatherings were socially very important, and every aspect was regulated by custom. To fail to observe these customs would be considered an insult to your host, and it would render one a social outcast. No one would extend an invitation to such a person, nor accept their invitation.

Luke reports that Jesus told two parables while at dinner. The first is addressed to the other invited guests. The custom of the day was to seat yourself as close to the host as possible to strengthen your relationship. Jesus suggests that guests seek not a position of honor and status, but instead a position of humility. Then the host can assign you to a position you deserve.

The second short parable begins with verse 10, and it is directed toward the host as the one who has invited those gathered. Again, Jesus suggests that the host not follow the tradition. He encourages him not to follow the accepted practice of inviting people with the expectation that they will, in turn, invite him to their table. Rather, the host should invite those who have no hope of being able to return the gesture, even if doing so can do great harm to one's reputation. In both cases, Jesus does not suggest that the system of placing people in positions of honor be abolished, or that people not invite others to their table as way of gaining honor or status. He does, rather, reverse how people attempting to use these systems are to gain the esteem of their host and others.

Jesus' own behavior breaks with custom and would be considered rude and improper. He is telling his host how to invite guests to his house. Jesus is also telling his fellow guests how they should behave as guests of another. But Jesus is telling a parable. As a parable, it is based in everyday life but points to a much larger reality. The banquet that he is speaking of is the Eternal Banquet, of which God is the host. The Pharisees, who expected the places of honor because of their efforts to live by the Torah, are being told by Jesus that God's assessment of who is deserving of the places of honor is very different. Luke does not need to report the reaction of Jesus' host or his fellow guests.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of your most memorable meals? What made them memorable?
2. When you go to banquets, where do you like to sit? Why? Are there also places you avoid?
3. Have you been to institutions where you felt like your every action was being scrutinized? How did that affect your ability to be yourself?
4. Are you able to recall an incident when you were consciously working to avoid embarrassment?
5. What other scripture stories about Pharisees, meals, and places of honor do you remember? How do these other stories help you to understand the text here?
6. Do you recall an occasion when you felt blessed by the company of people that others might look upon as undesirables?
7. What do you hear Jesus saying to you?
8. Did Jesus invite people to dine with him? Why? What impact did they have on him? What impact did he have on them and on you?
9. How do you think Jesus would feel if he sat at your table tonight? How would you feel? Do you think Jesus would accept your invitation? Do you think that Jesus is anxiously hoping for an invitation?

The reflection and questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

