

First Impressions 22nd SUNDAY -C-

Sirach 3: 17-18, 20, 28-30 Ps. 68 Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24 Luke 14: 1, 7-14

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Jesus seems out of character in the advice he gives today to his host, “one of the leading Pharisees.” Is he assuming the role of a social consultant, advising ambitious people how to get ahead while avoiding public embarrassment? If you want a higher or more prominent place at an important function then choose the lower seat. Then your host will publicly usher you to a higher place at the table. You’ll look great and everyone will note your moment of glory! Who wouldn’t want such an esteemed place and the admiring and envious glances of peers? So, is Jesus suggesting a pretense of humility to get the first place at important gatherings?

This doesn’t sound like the Jesus who had a bad reputation for eating with the disreputable. His table companions certainly wouldn’t have merited for Jesus a, “Here, come up higher,” from a leading Pharisee. He is not suggesting a feint in the direction of humility to earn public esteem. He is doing what he has consistently done, teaching his disciples to be truly humble, putting aside ambition for worldly honors.

Jesus isn’t suggesting we slack off at school; or work less diligently at our jobs; or not accept compliments for the good things we do. He wants us to use our talents as best we can since they are gifts from God and will not only benefit us but can be used for the well-being of others. But Jesus is reminding us that, behind all our attempts to work hard and do good for others, we must reflect on our reasons for doing what we do. As Christians we try to share the gifts of life we have, not so that we stand out, but so that others can stand up with us, relish life and celebrate the God who has blessed us.

Even more than now, in the ancient Near East, meals were guided by strict rules: the guests were carefully chosen; the foods specially selected; the seating arrangements scrupulously determined. There may not have been place cards, but people had their assigned places, nevertheless. Jesus may have been the one invited to dine by his host, but before the meal even started, Jesus became the host, as he suggested a change in the rigid seating arrangements and instructed people about the seats they had chosen.

Remember that this is a Sabbath meal. The very people Jesus says we should invited to a “banquet” are those who would have been excluded from the Sabbath meal at this distinguished Pharisee’s home, and possibly from the synagogue itself, because their social or physical

condition would have labeled them as sinners. But the Sabbath meal was to be a place that celebrated God's choice of an enslaved people and God's gift of liberation for them. When God found them, the Israelites were slaves. God reversed their condition and invited them to the table. The Sabbath meal not only celebrated God's gracious actions on their behalf, but it also reminded them that they were to do for others what had been done for them: free the enslaved; welcome the stranger; care for the children and protect the widows.

I am sure Jesus doesn't want us to stop having meals and sharing special occasions with those nearest and dearest to us. That's not what he means when he turns to the Pharisee who is hosting him and tells him to invite those to lunch or dinner who can't return the favor. If we make a point to invite the least, "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind..." then while at table with them, we might enter into new relationships. Not only would the poor be fed, but we would discover the Christ who identifies most closely with them.

Those neglected by our society not only need our material gifts, they also need the dignity that comes with being acknowledged; they need the gift of our friendship—and we need theirs as well. Together with them, we will experience the God Jesus has revealed to us, who loves us, not because we are distinguished or esteemed in our world, but because God has chosen to love us, rich and poor, haves and have-nots. The reality is that we seldom, if ever, go outside our social and familial circles. Sitting at table with one another will remind us of what God has done for us and who we all are, children of a loving and caring God, who has gifted each of us, whether we are hosting the meal or called in from the highways and byways of life to share in it.

No, Jesus hasn't had a shift in character. He isn't suggesting subtle ways to climb the social ladder so as to get places of esteem and influence. Rather, he wants those who have-- to reach out to those who have not. And if we sit across the table from each other, who knows where our conversations will lead?

Imagine the dinner scene: food and drink being passed and people who previously didn't know one another, involved in animated conversation. What might we hear at the table as we get to know the guests we have invited? We might hear and come to understand their need for: food and shelter; protection for their rights; good and safe schools for their children; a voice to speak out on their behalf in the community; health care and medicine for their families; help to process legal documents; employment, etc. We rarely get to know those whose lives are at the other end of the spectrum from us. But if we did, by having a dinner together, or initiating a conversation with them, we might come to recognize the others as unique persons and we might come to know their needs as well. Then, first hand, we will know what we must do to be Jesus'

faithful disciples.

Of course, it wouldn't all be sad talk, would it? At table, we would share stories of our family origins, our children's antics, recipes and traditions. At table we would discover how much we have in common as human beings, we would see less of what separates us and more of what unites us. Are we being too idealistic? Are we describing a purely imaginative scene that has no parallels in the "real world?" Maybe. But here at Eucharist we are gathered around a shared meal. The kind Jesus has described. He has invited us, and we have accepted the invitation. Granted, our parish communities can be pretty homogenous. But if we look a little more closely, we will notice more than enough diversity, especially these days in our very mobile world and with the arrival of so many immigrants.

There are many differences that would keep us separate. Nevertheless, here we are, together at the same table. We will listen to our common family story. It goes all the way back to Abraham and Sarah and to such sages as Sirach, in our first reading. In our worship our story focuses on Jesus, and his Spirit makes his words relevant to our day. We may be very different in the world, but here at Eucharist we are family. What have we learned about one another at this table? When we leave this worship space, what can we do for others, those whom Jesus would have us love the way he loves them?

COMMUNION PRAYER TO END HUNGER

God, food of the poor,
Christ our bread,
Give us all a place at the table,
Let us share the gifts of the earth
That comfort us and nourish us.

The sacrament of your body:
May breaking bread together
Remind us that we are all equal in your eyes.

The sacrament of your blood:
May sharing the cup together
Remind us that we must sustain each other.

Fill us with life,
With hope and love.
Grace us with your bountiful goodness,
Let us taste and see
That the Lord is good
and that we are one.
Amen.

(From, "Education for Justice")

JUSTICE NOTES

Labor Day 2007

"The Church fully supports the right of workers to form unions to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions. No one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. **Therefore, we firmly oppose organized efforts, such as those regrettably now seen in this country, to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing.**

Migrant agricultural workers today are particularly in need of the protection, including the right to organize and bargain collectively. U.S. labor law reform is needed to provide timely and effective remedies for unfair labor practices. (US Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All)

Did you know?

- North Carolina is the least unionized state in the country.
- FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee), www.floc.com is both a social movement and a labor union. Their immediate constituency is migrant workers in the agricultural industry, but they are also involved with immigrant workers, Latinos, our local communities, and national and international coalitions concerned with justice. The FLOC vision emphasizes *human rights* as the standard and *self-determination* as the process for achieving these rights. FLOC struggles for full justice for those who have been marginalized and exploited for the benefit of others and is seeking to change the structures of society to enable these people a direct voice in their own conditions.
- FLOC represents some 7,000 Mexican H2A "guest workers" coming each year to North Carolina. Through cooperative agreements, the North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA) and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee AFL-CIO have set up the only system to guarantee public integrity in the recruitment and processing of H2A "guest workers" for employment in the U.S.

What can I do?

Pray for those who labor. Pray for employers and for legislators, owners and managers that they will act with justice and provide living wages, affordable benefits and the freedom of association to their employees.

Read about the conditions of migrant workers and FLOC's new campaign on their behalf. <http://www.floc.com/documents/New%20Campaign.pdf>.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- David Gainey #0139378 (On death row since 7/13/99)
- Billy Anderson #0007328 (10/26/99)
- Iziah Barden #0491889 (11/12/99)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606