

“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:

Let's see, am I getting the table strategy in today's gospel story correctly? When I am invited to a dinner, if I want to avoid embarrassment in front of my distinguished and important peers, I shouldn't hustle for the first place. If I really want to look good and "enjoy esteem of [my] companions at table," I should use this strategy: go "humbly" to the last place, knowing all along I'll be called up higher by the host and thus win the esteem of all.

This is a very strange gospel passage indeed. Jesus seems to be suggesting a strategy that has nothing to do with the reign of God; but more to do with making an impression at social events. What's going on here? Has Jesus turned into a male counterpart to the columnist "Miss Manners?" We preachers have some work to do, because on first hearing, that's the way this passage sounds and so that is the way it will sound this weekend to our congregations. Let's look at this passage. What might it be saying to us whose modern eating arrangements differ from those in Jesus' time? We go to formal dinners where the place settings are already determined by little cards with our names inscribed---no chance here for us to pick the first or last place. Or which is more frequently the situations we find ourselves, we grab the kids and go to a fast-food restaurant before their soccer game and just plop down at any available table with our burgers, fries and cold drinks.

Jesus has been invited to the house of a prominent Pharisee. It is the sabbath and it was the practice to invite guests for a meal at the conclusion of the synagogue service. The atmosphere is charged; people are "observing him carefully." Are they checking his sabbath observance, his credentials as a religious Jew? Luke writes that Jesus tells them a parable. That's a pretty clear clue that this is not a moral teaching, nor an instruction on getting ahead at social events, or how to behave at dinners. Parables have more to do with our standing before God, who is the host at the banquet, to which Jesus is inviting all in need of mercy and acceptance.

Jesus has noticed how the other guests are maneuvering for choice seats, the places of honor. He is indicating that real places of honor are to be given by Another; we don't have to strive for honor ourselves. When the reign of God comes in its fullness, God will bestow honor on us at the banquet table. We, in the meanwhile, don't have to be anxious, or greedy for honor from God. Instead, we can concentrate our energies on tending to the humbler tasks involved in serving God. Hearing Jesus' invitation to this banquet, the truly humble disciple puts aside

strivings for high position and any claim of one's own worthiness. These are in Someone else's hands. Places at the table are given as a gift. They will all be good seats, places of honor. Imagine going to a baseball game and everyone gets to sit behind the home team's dugout—and there's plenty of room!

Jesus turns to the host with a challenge---- “Why do you entertain guests? Are you trying to gain points with influential people?” Rather, he tells them, they should be hospitable to the poor and outcasts who can't pay back. We don't need to be paid back or honored, not if we believe in the One in whose presence we stand. We are already invited as special guests to the banquet God is preparing for us. Our footing is secure; we stand honored by a most gracious “host.” As Monika Hellwig [GLADNESS THEIR ESCORT: HOMILETIC REFLECTIONS FOR SUNDAYS AND FEASTDAYS: YEAR ABC] has commented: Jesus is really saying to the guests at the banquet, “remember where you stand, and in whose presence.” Being conscious of the God of this banquet and the esteem with which we are already regarded, might embolden us to speak out more forcibly when injustice is done to ourselves or to others. For we know where we stand and in whose word we have placed our trust.

If we decide to preach about the humility suggested in this passage, let's be careful not to reinforce old and possibly repressive notions. Humility may be the least understood and most maligned of Christian virtues. People have kept themselves in miserable, even abusive situations, in the name of humility; “humbly” accepting their lot in life. While those with vested interests, have extolled this virtue, not for themselves, but for others to observe--- who should, “know their place.” What we may need in our church today is less false humility and more truly humble people who know their gracious God and speak and act boldly out of their gospel convictions.

In this second episode of the gospel passage, Jesus speaks about the guest list and who is on it. He has already identified with social unfortunates and outcasts. His message is sent to the highways and byways to call them in to the table he is preparing for them. They will sit with him at the banquet as honored guests. His disciples must understand that they, and anyone who acknowledges their poverty and need before God, are the special recipients of God's honor. If disciples really understand this message, they too will invite to the table of reconciliation and equality the very same honored guests—the blind, poor and those held captive by sin.

We want to be sure we have not erected social barriers that keep some from joining us at table. People should feel comfortable with us in this liturgical gathering, even if they: don't speak the majority's language and are not native born; come from a different economic status; are divorced, gay or single parents; are not as well educated; aren't descendants of those who

originally built the parish church; are unemployed, handicapped, etc. At the table discourses in Luke's gospel Jesus breaks through the barriers society and religion have constructed. What is learned at the table gatherings in this gospel is meant to be continued---- first by those disciples who sat at table with Jesus; then our present generation of Christians; right up to the final banquet when all will be fulfilled. Luke keeps reminding us that at this stage of the narrative Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and along the way he is showing his disciples who God is and how they are to live a life that reflects this hospitable God. To enable us to do so, he will die because of these teachings, and his death will make this new life possible in us.

Though all the meal episodes with Jesus reflect in some way what we do at this eucharistic table, most of the meals were in very ordinary settings. They didn't have the solemnity of the Last Supper. Some were in a more friendly environment (with Mary and Martha, at the multiplication of the loaves, with his disciples, etc.) than today's dinner in the Pharisee's house. When we consider how "secular" these meals were, we can also look again at the daily meals we eat.

Do we see the seeming ordinary meals as special, even holy meals—not always formal, sit-down affairs, but holy, nevertheless. Holy, not because of the scent of incense, the sound of hymns and the glow of candles, but holy because Christ joins his disciples wherever we gather to share a meal. We wheel an aged parent along with our young children to a meal at a pizza parlor; we talk with a troubled colleague over some pallid airline food flying home from a business trip; we make pancakes for the family on a rare Saturday morning together; we invite friends over for hot dogs and hamburgers for a Labor Day picnic; a mother and daughter share a malt and chat while shopping together for a wedding dress; we have a weekday meal before going for a parent-teacher's meeting at our kid's elementary school. And of course, there are the special occasion meals-- anniversaries, baptisms, weddings Thanksgiving, a brunch after a funeral, Sunday dinner, etc.—all occasions when the disciples gather with family and friends; as one friend puts it, with "the in-laws and the outlaws." All are chances for us to reach out and offer hospitality, despite past offenses, while we recall the One who reached out to us and does again at this Eucharist--- despite our own past offenses. We were included on a guest list we never earned a place on. That's what we remember as we compile and examine all the "guest lists" we make in our lives—for the in-laws and the outlaws.

The righteous Pharisees, who saw themselves already comfortably established in God's favor, just by their birth and religious standing, wouldn't be caught dead with the newcomers Jesus would invite to the table. But Jesus sat down and ate with Pharisees and, on other days, with outcasts, to show that all are sinners and all can be reconciled at the table of the Lord. By our presence at this Eucharist today we are not admitting we are better than those who are not here.

Rather, we are expressing that we know who we are—sinners, welcomed to the banquet where we are shown once again that we are forgiven friends of God, table companions with Jesus. We certainly wouldn't want to exclude anyone from being with us, lest in doing that, we fail to reflect Jesus' wide embrace--- and in so doing, exclude ourselves as well.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

BEST ADVICE FOR PREACHING. Edited by John S. Mc Clure. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, (Paper, 170 pages)

Mc Clure sent a preaching questionnaire to 24 renowned preachers and homileticians from diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Their responses were divided into ten chapters in the book, each covering a practical preaching topic. In addition, each chapter was edited by a different contemporary "name" in the field of preaching. There's lots of helpful and informational material in this book. It will also familiarize you with some of the current influential voices in preaching.

QUOTABLE:

In polishing the sermon, it should be remembered that preaching is an oral event and not a written essay. Therefore, we need to think constantly about how the sermon is going to sound to people who are listening rather than reading.

—John R. Claypool in *BEST ADVICE FOR PREACHING*, page 86

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

For the Eucharist to be a living promise of the fullness of God's kingdom, the faithful must commit themselves to living as redeemed people with the same care and love for all people that Jesus showed. The body of Christ which worshipers receive in Communion is also a reminder of the reconciling power of his death on the cross. It empowers them to work to heal the brokenness of society and human relationship and to grow in a spirit of self-giving for others.

----#333, the U.S. bishops pastoral, ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL