



The Inclusive Community

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 29, 2010

Luke 14: 7-14

Inclusivity

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

The first thing that strikes me as I read this passage is how much alike we are over the centuries and across the cultures. Our technology changes and the daily burden of living is eased but our feelings and our motives are remarkably similar.

Get the scene Luke gives us. Jesus is invited to a large dinner party by a wealthy person. He does not turn down elaborate meals or reject the affluent. He always brings to them his own values as we shall see.

The scene is dramatic. Jesus stands at a distance and watches the human comedy as guests file in and try to get the best places at the table. Seats have not been assigned and so we have a free market, capitalist, survival of the fittest situation.

Jesus observes and comments on attitudes with which we are familiar: self-preservation, shame, mixed motives, calculation about what we can get away with and for how long. Jesus observes the attitudes that make news today on the internet and in the media and he watches people fall from grace into humiliation.

Here is how it goes. People enter the dining room and take the best seats. The self-promotion leads to shame as the host brings in guests of honor and asks people in the best seats to find a different place. This makes the rest of the dinner a disappointment. They look continually at the guests of honor and feel diminished.

Jesus notes that if people were grateful to be at the dinner and gave others a chance to get a better seat, they might have been moved up by the host. Then they would feel honored and grateful.

Is there anything different in this picture from what we see today?

All of us here are far more affluent and comfortable than human beings have ever been. I was visiting Theresa's family in Kansas City a few weeks ago and we were reminded of how people lived a century or so ago, in small farming communities, on the Santa Fe and Oregon trails. The wagons, the danger, the sickness, the premature deaths, the back-breaking labor, the poverty. This was the lot of most of people until fairly recently.

Money was distributed far less equitably. Almost everyone was poor. There was very little comfort. These people would see our lives as extravagantly wealthy, as privileged, almost excessively so. To observe this is not to diminish the burdens, heart-ache, fear, unemployment, disappointments and losses of our own lives. It is only to put them in perspective.

We have all been invited to the banquet of life. Often we are not grateful for the invitation but resentful of those who have more, often unfairly so (life is not always fair). But we have been invited to the banquet of life and we were given so much. No matter how little we have, it is already a gift. Our expectation for more makes us dissatisfied with the gift,

Jesus then turns to his host as the host is watching Jesus. Jesus says that the best guest list at a party invites people you want to be there, not because they can make your life better but because you enjoy their company.

In the first century, the general rule in Roman, and even Jewish life was, in Latin, do ut des. "I give so that you will give in return." Dinner parties were used to build alliances. A dinner invitation was not an act of generosity but a calculated strategy. The host gained a reputation for associating with glittering and glorious guests. Photo ops and bragging rights included. The host also gained by putting people in a debt of gratitude and reciprocity. Do ut des, Remember, I am doing this for you. What have you done for me lately? We see this today as well, do we not?

Jesus says to the host that a dinner party might be more enjoyable if the host expected no return and if the host invited people who could not easily repay or reciprocate. The host is no different from the guest who grabbed the best seat. Both are not there for

dinner but for self-promotion, for self-advantage, to get what they can from this dinner. The guests of honor are those who have the resources to reciprocate extravagantly.

INCLUSIVITY

REV. DR. ANTHONY T. PADOVANO

Such dinners create agita, anxiety, heart-burn. They are shot through with manipulation, maneuvering, shame, resentments, power games, self-importance. No one is enjoying the dinner. Everyone is looking for more. Is this a good way to live?

The human comedy. We are good at making our own lives miserable.

Jesus suggests we go on a spiritual diet rather than seeking to stuff ourselves with advantages.

The first thing that struck me as I read this passage is how so many elements in human life seem to change little. The scene at that dinner party two thousand years ago is not so different from Wall Street greed or work-place competition.

The second thing that strikes me is how wise Jesus is. He tells us that lives of generosity and gratitude are a banquet worth attending. Acquisitive lives, greedy lives, ungrateful lives, endlessly calculating lives are lives that bring us indigestion and emptiness. They take away the delight that comes with sharing, with expecting less because we are so thankful for what we have.

There was a time when all of us felt that if someone just said "I love you" and wanted to marry us we would be happy forever. There was a time when we might have said: If I could just have a child or a home or a career or a circle of friends who care about me, if I had this, I would be content.

We add to this list so many artificial necessities. Soon nothing is enough – ever.

So, we have choices.

We are all invited to the banquet of life. What shall we do with the invitation? Will we squander it, ruin the meal, fight endlessly for more?

Thomas Wolfe, the American novelist, once said that there comes a time in life when we wish we had one more healthy day, one more time to see the sun rise, The sun rose today. Did we notice? Were we grateful?

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that if the stars came out only once in a thousand years we would be grateful for them. The stars came out last night and we missed them.

m

This world of ours is filled with good, generous, loving, caring people. Do we see them? Or do we decide that everything is bad and getting worse? There are so few evil people in the world. This is why they make news.

INCLUSIVITY

REV. DR. ANTHONY T. PADOVANO

Henry David Thoreau once said that many of us choose to live lives of quiet desperation. There is no need for this. We just choose it.

If this world were so bad and we were so hopeless, would Jesus have returned to it? Would God have sent us the Spirit? Would we have found one another? If the world were so bad, would children continue to laugh in it? Would people fall in love and dream dreams and shed tears of happiness?

We were all invited to the great banquet of life. What are we going to do with the invitation?