

Humility and Hospitality

The story goes about the couple who received an invitation to an engagement party located in a town several hours away. The groom was the son of some dear friends, so they decided to make the trip even though they would know very few people at the party.

The party was at night and the dimly lit street made it difficult to find the house. Thus, they were greatly relieved to see balloons on a mailbox and a party overflowing with people. As they walked up the drive and into the house, everyone was quite friendly and welcoming.

But after a while, they got confused when they didn't see their friends. So they began asking people, and they discovered that no one knew their friends. It turned out they were at the wrong house and wrong party. Their party was on the next block. Somehow, they had managed to stay forty-five minutes at the wrong party. They were horrified! But on the way out, people shouted, "Nice to meet you!" "Come back and enjoy our party if you can."

Humility and hospitality all at the same time!

Saint Benedict lived in the 6th century and founded a monastic order whose monasteries and abbeys are still thriving today. Their guiding principle is that "a monastery is never without guests, and all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ."

Presbyterian writer Kathleen Norris, who often stays with the Benedictines, says that "if it regularly exercises enough hospitality so as to attract guests, it is a monastery. If it doesn't, it is not." (*Amazing Grace*, pp. 263-264)

That might also be a description of a real church. "If it regularly exercises enough hospitality so as to attract guests, it is a church. If it doesn't, it isn't."

Our two parables from Jesus which involve dinner parties, show us what this might look like – to be a good host, and to be a good guest.

As guests in the first parable we're told to seek out the less desirable seats so that we may then be invited to a higher place, rather than presume to have a seat of honor and then be demoted. But not to be misunderstood - this is not advice on how to get oneself exalted.

Because humility cannot be faked – it is either genuine or it is not humility.

Pretending to be the least will not bring about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. This is not a strategy to win approval. Rather, this is the way God works: God humbles the proud, dethrones the arrogant, and honors the lowly and cast aside.

After all, God knows our true heart and when we're pretending to be humble and when we're genuine.

And as hosts in the second parable, we're to include everybody – especially those we may not have included on the guest list.

You see, in Jesus' Mediterranean world mealtime was very important, and a very powerful means of communication. Meals affirmed and gave legitimacy to a person's role and status in their community.

Accepting an invitation to dinner in Jesus' day obligated a guest to return the favor. And so it was not uncommon for guests to decline an invitation, especially if they realized that returning the favor was more than they could or cared to handle.

And while we, today, may have similar expectations around invitations and dinner parties, in Jesus' day, this practice of reciprocity was a real determiner of social and economic status. This basic rule of behavior guided every host in drawing up the guest list: I do you a favor; you do me a favor—endlessly.

And so, inviting people who cannot return the favor was viewed as cultural and social suicide. Such guests—the poor, crippled, lame, and blind (v. 13)—are clearly people of a lower social status than the host; and to associate with them was to dishonor one's own status. Because one's social equals would then shun future invitations, and a host of means would be socially ruined.

But then comes Jesus! It is better, he says, that we invite the unwanted and discarded to our dinners and be happy when they cannot repay us. For our payment will be in heaven.

And in this, Jesus shows us true hospitality. Godly hospitality – that is, hospitality that comes from a place of genuine humility – doesn't make its invitations to maintain or further one's social standing. Remember God knows our true heart, and at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward and honor the host who has been gracious to those unable to return an invitation.

You see, although Jesus seems to be giving instructions about giving and receiving dinner parties here on earth, he is also pointing to heaven. Jesus suggests we can get a glimpse of the magnificent meal in heaven by hosting meals on earth which include all kinds of people, particularly those who are in need.

But Jesus is not just suggesting we provide food at a food pantry or a once a year Thanksgiving meal for the homeless. Jesus is encouraging the hosts to dine with the guests.

And Jesus is asking nothing of his disciples that he himself wouldn't do. Throughout his life, he continually chooses to eat and interact with sinners. He invites and includes those who have been traditionally left out. He pushes back boundaries and challenges his disciples to do the same.

And in this Jesus is introducing a new kind of hospitality, one not built on common practices, but on grace and gracious sharing of resources. No paybacks are to be expected.

The story comes to us from 19th century England – I don't know if it happened, but it must be true:

Queen Victoria was once at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The guest of honor had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief

him beforehand about its purpose. So he took the bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents down!

For an instant there was breathless silence among the British privileged guests, and then they began to whisper to one another. All that stopped, however, when Queen Victoria silently took her finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it, and drank its contents! A moment later, 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own finger bowls.

It was the queen's gracious hospitality that saved her guest from certain embarrassment.

But we must never forget that while God will bring people our way to whom we must be the host; we are always, in our life as Christians, the guest. This is what keeps us humble, remembering that we are invited into Christ's presence, to a banquet of grace and love, and that we will never be able to repay the generous host as equals.

I also like the story historians tell about the funeral of Charlemagne. Charlemagne was the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages, and after his death, a tremendous funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral at Aix. When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who barred the cathedral door.

"Who comes?" the Bishop asked, as was the custom.

"Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," proclaimed the Emperor's proud herald.

"Him I know not," the Bishop replied. "Who comes?"

The herald, a bit shaken, replied, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth."

"Him I know not," the Bishop said again. "Who comes?"

The herald, now completely crushed, responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ," to which the Bishop responded,

"Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

The point, of course, is that in God's eyes, we're all equally needy - Charlemagne, the homeless person, the Queen of England, you and me. None of us will ever be "good enough" to expect that the presence of God belongs to us.

But the good news is that we belong to God.

The table is set for us – for all of us.

The invitations have been sent,

the good china is out,

the silver has been polished

and the place cards have been tossed in the trash.

Amen.