

Proper 17-c
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St. Stephen's, Spokane

One of my favorite things on church office walls is the Church Pension Fund calendar with a cartoon for each month. About two years ago there was a cartoon with a woman (wearing a hat and sensible shoes) tapping a man on the shoulder as he sat in a pew with his wife. She said, "I understand you are newcomers. So glad you're here. Welcome. Oh, by the way, you're in my pew."

So much for hospitality and the challenge of welcoming newcomers. (This actually has happened to me visiting other churches in the Diocese. It is an interesting experience – embarrassing and amusing at the same time.

It is important to us to know that we have a place. It is reassuring. It gives us a sense of belonging and stability, whether that is in church or work or some other part of our lives. The question that comes out of that sense of having a place, though, is whether that place we occupy is something to be claimed and defended, or whether it is a gift to be shared.

The whole issue of having a place is at the center of today's gospel reading. We see it through the lens of a dinner party that raises questions of: Who sits where? Who is invited? and Who gets the best seat? But even though the passage sounds like a commentary how to behave at a dinner party, that's not really what the passage is about. Jesus, in a pair of short parables, begins with table manners, but he's really teaching about the reign of God.

The two little parables have to do, essentially, with how people are seated at a dinner party and who gets invited. It is advice for both guests and hosts.

It helps to understand a bit about the social significance of meals in that culture. Meals, for instance, were important social ceremonies. It really mattered who was invited to dinner and it mattered where people were seated. Pliny the younger, a lawyer and philosopher of ancient Rome commenting in a letter about a dinner party he attended, noted that the hosts had a few special guests who sat near him and were served lovely food and fine wine while most of the rest of the guests had much cheaper fare. In that social climate, position mattered.

So it's easy to understand why people would want to sit in the best seats. The food and drink would be much better and the social status would be higher. For most of us, entertaining isn't that formal. And if we worry about who sits where, it's usually to make sure people sit with others they'd enjoy meeting.

Another piece of the cultural puzzle is the sense of shame and honor which had great importance and continues to have great importance in some parts of the world. To be asked to step down to a lesser or lower place at the table would be an occasion of great shame. To be invited to move up, though, would be a great honor. Honor could only be granted by another. So Jesus' advice to sit in the lowest place – a place where one would most likely be asked to move up – could sound shrewd and strategic. But there was something else going on here.

Amid all that conversation about jockeying for position, there is a message about humility. When I say humility, I don't mean groveling or presenting ourselves as less than we are. Humility really means a deep honesty about who we are that isn't driven by

our social status, our circle of friends, our educational level or our income, but rather by the certainty that we belong to God – which moves that other stuff off the screen.

Sometimes people describe humility as being ‘comfortable in our own skin.’ Members of the Benedictine religious order talk about having an ‘undefended heart.’ There is a freedom about that kind of humility – freedom from the pressure to be someone we are not. What you see is what you get.

It also means that where we sit at the table really isn’t that important. The important thing is that we sit at God’s table by God’s invitation and not our own effort. It is sheer grace.

Jesus’ teaching was challenging for his contemporaries for whom the social stratification was intense – and the dinner party was often where it was acted out. To say that social status didn’t matter was radical. Certainly it can be counter-cultural in our own time as well. I’ve often wondered if our fascination with celebrity – with who is on the red carpet in Hollywood – at who is seen with whom – is a symptom of this. There is a whole industry of magazines that feed off this interest. There may be a part of us that really longs for that great seat at the banquet. A chance to rub shoulders with people of status. But Jesus’ advice is to hold out for the seat at God’s table – a very different kind of position.

The second little parable is advice to the host, which continues to blow the social convention of the dinner party right out of the water. Change your guest list, he says. Don’t just invite people who can return the favor. Don’t just invite people in your inner circle. Invite the blind, the lame, the poor, the crippled – people you’ve never had on

your social calendar. Someone once commented on this passage, ‘God doesn’t love the glitter of your guest list.’

This really levels the playing field and reflects Jesus’ own practice of meals that were occasions of celebration. Meals that had guest lists that always raised eyebrows. Meals that reflected the expansive inclusiveness of the reign of God.

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to serve at Holy Trinity’s Wednesday night Dinner Table in the West Central neighborhood have had a little window into this. At Holy Trinity, all who need a meal (and will fit into the parish hall on a given evening) are invited – served family style at round tables and honored as guests. They share a holy space at mealtime. There’s always a place at the table there.

Jesus’ advice to his host -- to invite the people who haven’t been on his guest list - reflects that reversal that we find so often in the gospels where the poor and the outcast find themselves in places of acceptance and honor. It brings to mind the familiar words of the Cantic of Mary, the Magnificat: “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” This is, in short, revolutionary. It is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus suggests that those who expand their guest lists will be rewarded. But inviting the outcasts to dinner is not a strategy for success; it is mandate of hospitality and a sign of the reign of God. It is about making a place for all – not just in church pews and dinner tables, but on this earth we all share.

Making space is an important part of what the church does. Making a place for all –especially the poor and marginalized—is a sign of the reign of God. Making a place in church for those we do not know -- for strangers – visitors -- newcomers – is, as

Hebrews reminds us, a way of entertaining angels. And before long, St. Stephen's will be welcoming a new priest into your midst. What will a welcoming space look like for him or her?

The Diocese of Rhode Island had a very engaging evangelism effort a few years ago that focused on the table of the Eucharist, but had much broader implications. Their billboards and posters simply said, "There's a place for you at the table."

And perhaps that's the "aha" that we can take with us from this gospel reading. A reminder about our place at God's table. A gift to be sure, but also a gift to be shared.