

HUMILITY
IS NOT THINKING
LESS OF YOURSELF,
IT IS THINKING
OF YOURSELF LESS.
-C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis said “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.” The Gospel passage this morning raises questions about humility and self-esteem. Sometimes people think Jesus is saying “be humble” meaning unworthiness, low self-esteem, don’t put yourself forward, and melt into the background. Unfortunately, that can get translated into an unhealthy view of ourselves. On the other hand, when we post something on Facebook, we get wrapped up in how many “likes” we got – did anyone

even notice? We have all heard cautionary tales about how often posts show only the good side of our life and actually end up causing us to feel more lonely, more isolated because we don’t have the response we thought we deserved and those “look how wonderful” posts actually hide the reality of life with both its ups and down. I think Jesus is reminding us that each and every one of us is loved and welcome at the table – neither an inflated ego that will only be satisfied with a head table position nor a too-low ego that feels unworthy to be have a seat. There is a seat for everyone. Everyone is loved by God. We are worthy of love.

Meals are often times for discussion about current events. “How was your day” or “how was school today” are often how the discussion starts. Meals can be a chance to sit together with your family and friends in a safe environment for a few quiet minutes after the work for the day is done. It is a time to reconnect after time apart. Scientific studies are quite clear that eating together with conversation strengthens relationships.¹

After all the stories in the Gospels about Jesus eating at the homes of Pharisees and other leaders- and during the meal upsetting normal customs and expectations,- you would think that word had gotten around. “Don't invite Jesus- it won't be a pleasant meal. He will do and say the strangest things! And, some of your other guests will be upset.” Better by far to steer clear of asking Jesus to your house for dinner unless you need a little shock value to keep everybody talking.

Jesus, once again, does the unexpected. First, he accepts the invitation to eat with those he knows oppose –or at least don't support- his ministry and his understanding of what God is doing in the world. A Pharisee was someone who strictly observed the letter of the law. The spirit of the law is what Jesus, by and large, supported and so he and the Pharisees were often at odds over how to live. Jesus was all about grace and mercy supplanting a strict constructionist approach. Because of the Pharisees insistence upon following the strict interpretation of the law, Jesus felt they often were hypocrites because they didn’t see the human need right in front of them. Jesus ate with them and talked with them to help them see that while there is a place for “the law” we also need

¹ www.heraldextra.com/momclick/parenting/the-benefits-of-eating-together-as-a-family (Aug. 26, 2019)

to keep front and center the needs of everyday people who are doing the best they can but who also fall short and are in need of grace and mercy.

Second, Jesus doesn't support the norms: when you throw a dinner party, it reflects well on you if important people accept your invitation and sit next to the host- showing the importance by where you are seated. Each one of us has probably been to a dinner or other social event where place cards dictate where we sit: how close to the front table or the importance of the other people seated at the same table with us. Think of the "head table" at awards banquets or weddings.

Invite those who can do nothing for you, Jesus says. Do not ask those who will repay you by reciprocating hospitality. Look out for the poor, those in prison, those being tortured, and the hungry. Sit at the seat farthest from the host rather than the one closest. Be open to new table companions. We have a tendency to choose the same seat at the table each time. It's comfortable. It's safe. And for those of us who are left-handed, it avoids bumping elbows!

I wonder if that's why so many sit in the furthest back pews. I cordially invite all of you to move to the front!

What bothers me about interpreting this passage literally is the notion of deliberately sitting at a "lowly" seat so that you can be invited to move forward. That smacks of manipulating the system. Won't others be jealous when the host picks me out and asks me to move closer? Certainly not what Jesus means. But what does he mean? Perhaps Jesus means for us to understand that we are each created by the God who loves us. No one of us is more important than any other. We need to offer hospitality to all, regardless of our status or the lack of status in our secular world.

I also wonder if we should read this passage a bit less literally. Is Jesus also saying that each of us, being human, is also at times poor, crippled, lame or blind- at least in a figurative sense? Each of us has parts of our lives that might be classified as poor in the sense that we are not using our gifts and talents to the fullest extent possible. We might be considered crippled or lame because we are afraid to stand up straight and have healthy self-esteem. We might be considered blind in our failures to see those in need around us or to have mercy or compassion on those less fortunate.

Hospitality is desirable and is to be offered at all times. Hospitality is the friendly and generous reception of guests, visitors and strangers. Hospitality is to be offered to those we do not know as well as to those we do know. Hospitality is a frame of mind as well as outward action. It is acknowledging the Christ in each of us. It is seeking a way to be a blessing to each person we meet. Welcome to your table all those in need. Hospitality also encompasses honoring the norms of the society or the family or the company in which you find yourself. Honor the boundaries of "good behavior" which exist, after all, to help us get along by knowing what is expected of us. This doesn't ask us to be automatons with no thoughts in our head or no willingness to challenge the status quo when that is needed. Certainly Jesus challenged the status quo over and over again. With the exception of overturning the tables in the Temple, Jesus did so through word and example.

God values each life. God doesn't judge us by what material possessions we have. Rather, God asks that we live out the values of love and justice and peace. God tells us to recognize the inherent spark of the divine that is in each person. Whether we like them or not- whether we agree or not- each person is created in the likeness and image of God. Therefore, every person- whether we like them or not- whether we can truly understand their life choices or not- is worthy of love and respect as someone created by God.

The way we live- the values we evidence through how we live and move and have our being- says more about how we understand ourselves and our place in God's realm than a privileged place at a banquet. Our charge is to live a life that imitates Christ- the Christ that is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. While our understanding of whom Christ is and how we are to respond may change as we grow and mature, the essence of Christ is the same.

Just as we view Mt. McKinley, now officially known by its Native name of Denali – we view Denali differently depending upon whether we are at ground level or at 7,000 ft., or whether we are looking at it from the north or the south. Whatever our perspective, it is still Denali. Our perspective has changed- not the mountain.

It's all too human to want to bask in reflected glory. "Keeping up with the Jones's" is all about having one's focus on money and material things-not on the things of God. When we keep our lives free from the love of money we are content with what we have, then we are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Too often, we preen- inwardly or outwardly- when we think others recognize our importance. Our walls become places to hang the trophies and plaques that tell the world: "Look, I'm important." Jesus really is asking us "Where is your focus- or where are your priorities?" Do you even consider where you might be blind or lame or crippled or poor? Do you even consider who might lead you to an abundant life?

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it more simply: "Rather, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." There's nothing wrong with money, per se. There's nothing wrong with inviting friends and family to dinner. The key question, though, is what is driving the invitation to dinner and have we left out someone who could use a good meal? There's nothing wrong with a nice house or a reliable car. The key question is whether we bought the house to be a safe refuge or to show off our worldly success. Hebrews tell us what God wants: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Motives matter. Actions matter. Words that do not match or motives or our actions are not pleasing to God.

As long as we realize that all that we have comes from God, and that God asks only that we return 10% - a Biblical tithe- to God- we can deploy our resources to support a safe and comfortable life. God asks that we use our resources prudently and respectfully, honoring God's creation. God wants us to continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God-that our lips confess His name. Where are your priorities? Do you continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God? What's holding you back? Amen.