

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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September 1, 2019

Proper 17, Year C

“When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher.”

In the first section of today's Gospel reading, Jesus sounds like Miss Manners teaching the social graces. When invited to a dinner party, don't waltz in and grab the best seat at the table in case someone more important than you shows up and your host has to move you down the social ladder. Instead, park yourself in the worst seat and give your host the opportunity to invite you to a better place. Sounds like a pretty good social strategy; if you follow Jesus' advice, you've nothing to lose. You certainly won't look *bad*, and you may very well maneuver yourself into looking *good* and *humble* at the same time.

It is when Jesus launches into the second part of his speech that his social advice starts to give us trouble – just like it undoubtedly troubled the respectable folks around the dinner table who first heard Jesus' words. When you entertain, Jesus advises, don't invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbors. Don't invite the ones who will invite you back, help your business or help you move up in the world. Instead, invite those who can't repay you; invite those from whom you have nothing to gain. Open your doors and invite in the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

Let's face it: in terms of social norms, in both Jesus' day and our own, Jesus' advice is strange, unattractive, and unreasonable to most people. Why should any one of us fill up the house with the needy and the handicapped? It sounds like a lot of bother and it doesn't sound like much fun. What good will it do you? Jesus as Miss Manners seems to have lost it.

But Jesus isn't Miss Manners. The Gospel passage we have set before us this morning was never intended to be advice about etiquette, about how to get on in society. This morning's Gospel is not about the social graces; it is about the grace of God

In the world of social graces, the currency that has buying power is status. Status has to do with where you stand in the pecking order of your community, with looking good compared to other people, with keeping up and getting ahead. Even our children keep track of what sneakers are in and what are out.

The world that Jesus describes, the world he calls the Kingdom of Heaven, is very different. The currency of the Kingdom is not status but grace. Grace is the love of God poured out freely and abundantly upon all, regardless of status, regardless of any of the social, economic, physical and even moral distinctions that mean so much to human beings. In the world of the Kingdom of Heaven all are welcome – high, low, rich, poor, weak, strong, sighted, blind, saints, sinners – and there are no greater or lesser seats at God's table. We have a place at God's table not because we have somehow earned it, but simply because God invites us.

St. John's, West Hartford, like every church, is supposed to be an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven, that world of very different values that Jesus describes in today's Gospel. We come to this place not because we are competent or important but because we are loved, welcomed and expected. Here there is a seat for every one of us at the only table that matters – God's table.

Samuel Naidoo, the assistant sexton of my old parish, Trinity Church, Hartford, was a man who knew in his bones what the Kingdom of heaven and the Church of God are about. As he stood at the church door on a Sunday, he was always on the look out for strangers to welcome them. Sam would even go out to people walking down the street to invite them in, especially if the people looked troubled or sad. Sigourney Street being what it is, the invited were sometimes homeless and shabby. They would look embarrassed and tell Sam that they couldn't come in because they weren't properly dressed and weren't clean. Sam would tell *them* that didn't matter because

God doesn't care what we look like on the outside; God looks at the heart. And what is more, Sam would tell them, the people at Trinity Church see folks just the way God does. Sam gave us quite a mission to live up to.

The sad truth, however, is that we in the church do not always see people as God sees them. We often do get hung up looking at appearances and judging people for all sorts of prejudicial reasons as 'not of our kind.' Snobbery, classism, racism and the like are no strangers to those who call themselves Christian, and they still wound the heart of Christ.

Who is welcome in your life? Who is welcome in this church? Do we pray and act in a way that opens our hearts and our doors to all? Or do we welcome only those with whom we are comfortable?

Jesus doesn't tell the parables in today's Gospel to teach us about dinner parties, but to teach us about the Kingdom of God. He tells us that when we come to God's banquet table, we will discover that there's a place of honor reserved for all of us and that it does not matter if we are maimed or blind or lame, whether we are rich or poor, because all the guests are family and are loved and welcomed by our host. And the funny thing is that the head table is big enough for everybody.

Every month a group of folks from St. John's meets in our parish kitchen to prepare a meal for the Loaves and Fishes feeding program in Hartford's Asylum Hill neighborhood. Those who cook it donate much of the food. They take the food to the Loaves and Fishes dining room at Immanuel Congregational Church and serve it up to several hundred hungry strangers. Every Sunday this summer other St. John's parishioners gather up vegetables we have grown in raised beds, beds donated by another parishioner. Even more parishioners have tended and weeded and harvested the crops. After the service, another group gives the vegetables to our neighbors waiting on the sidewalk. Why do you do these things? Why go out of your way, spend your money and your time, to provide meals and produce for people you don't even know, people who won't send you a thank you note and won't be able to reciprocate your hospitality? I think it must have something to do with the Good News of God's Kingdom, something you have heard about and that you have experienced as you have gathered at the Lord's Table in this church.

There is much for us to learn and to be enriched by in sharing God's love with everyone. Our fellow human beings in all their infinite variety of circumstance, appearance and persuasion; whether they worship in churches, temples, synagogues, mosques or none of the above; whether they live next door, across our country, across our national borders, or across the globe - they are all neighbors who remind us that beneath the surface we are all essentially one. And for all of us, life is fragile. At any moment the protective padding we build around ourselves can melt away and we can lose our health, our homes, our savings, our loved ones, our lives. Our real strength and our hope lie in realizing our connectedness and mutual dependency upon one another and upon God who "so loves the world."

The God we meet in Jesus invites us to open not just our doors but our hearts to one another and in so doing bring the values of the Kingdom of Heaven to life here on earth.

So look around you this morning and if there is someone you see whom you have never met, go over to greet them and introduce yourself as we share the Peace. Make it a point to be friendly and courteous to the strangers you will meet this week - on the street, sidewalk, in an elevator at work, in the checkout lane at the market. Go say welcome to that new neighbor. Bring a gift. Practice random acts of kindness. Celebrate our connectedness as the human family.

When you listen to the news and hear about people with whom you disagree politically, remember that we need to respect one another and listen to one another in spite of our differences. When you hear about people in trouble or need, whether they be fellow Americans living in the path of tropical storms or illegal aliens being arrested by immigration authorities, pray for them as folks much like yourself. And speaking of immigration, what might Jesus' Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven have to say to our country's immigration policy?

We really do need one another here on planet earth. No single person and no nation can make it on our own. We need to learn to respect and treasure one another, to live in harmony and peace.

The Gospel invitation to find our places humbly and thankfully at God's table is no mere social nicety but a vital necessity. In fact, our lives depend upon it.