

Jesus, the Disruptive Dinner Guest

Today's Gospel presents Jesus where we often find him, at dinner on the sabbath. Jesus frequently took advantage of table fellowship as an opportunity to teach. Dinner parties gave Jesus a captive audience, allowing him to say pretty much whatever he liked. If his fellow guests didn't want to offend their host, they'd be reluctant to get up and leave or even to argue too aggressively with Jesus. They might watch him closely and gossip about him later, but they weren't likely to cause a scene over the salad course.

At this particular dinner, Jesus reproaches his fellow guests when he sees them jockeying for seats of honor at the table, saying "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He also has a few choice words for his host. "[W]hen you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

When my husband and I throw a dinner party, we don't normally expect our guests to start lecturing everyone the instant they come through the door. Ordinarily, dinner guests greet my husband, present me with flowers or a bottle of wine, and say something nice about our home before we offer them a drink and introduce them around. These little niceties are a social dance. We all know the steps by heart, and waltzing through them makes for a pleasant evening. The social conventions of Jesus's time were undoubtedly different from ours, but I'm pretty confident that they didn't include scolding the guests and schooling the host. It's not polite, but Jesus doesn't seem to care. In fact, Jesus seems determined to step on as many toes as possible, and he unquestionably succeeds.

So what is Jesus trying to accomplish here? Does he honestly believe that offending people is the best way to get their attention? And what's so bad about wanting to sit in the place

of honor anyway? That's where the power is. Important people work hard to get and stay where they are. What's wrong with wishing for a little recognition? Or asking influential people over for dinner? If you want to get ahead in this world, you need to network, to build connections with the people who can help you, to show them that you're one of them and that you deserve their admiration. And can't I do more good in the world as a pillar of the community with powerful friends than I could as some inconsequential nobody hiding out at the far end of the table? Doesn't Jesus understand that criticizing people for exalting themselves, suggesting that their host shouldn't even have invited them, is so offensive that they won't listen to another word he says? Honestly, does he *want* to get crucified?

Well, maybe. But I don't think that's what Jesus is doing here.

Jesus says, "[A]ll who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted ... when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Jesus is impressing upon his listeners the importance of genuine humility of spirit. As John Calvin (who could be pretty prideful himself) observed:

...by a comparison taken from men, [Jesus] describes what we ought to be inwardly before God. 'Were it to happen that a guest should foolishly take possession of the highest place, and should, on that account, be put down to the lowest, he would be so completely overpowered with shame as to wish that he had never gone higher. Lest the same thing should happen to you, that God would punish your arrogance with the deepest disgrace, resolve, of your own accord, to be humble and modest.'

The dinner guests who jockey for the seats of honor in today's Gospel might be so haughty that Jesus can't resist taking them down a peg or two. Or they just might not realize that no human being, no matter how exalted on Earth, is in any position to be prideful before God. Putting aside the obvious imbalance of power – the Father made everything, owns everything,

controls everything, and is omnipotent, omniscient and eternal while we're just *not* – there hasn't been a human being on Earth, apart from Jesus and maybe his mother, who could get through the day without messing up at least once. Human arrogance isn't just sinful, it's silly. Jesus probably feels sorry for those poor, deluded people who think it matters where they sit at dinner. Perhaps he hopes to keep them from making bigger fools of themselves than they already have.

Jesus's advice to his host – give to those who can't repay you – may be less about posturing and more about politics. It suggests that the leader of the Pharisees invited people not because he liked them or wanted to be kind to them, but because they could be politically useful. Maybe he chose other high ranking religious leaders who could help him assess this upstart country rabbi and decide what to report back to the Temple authorities. Maybe the Pharisee wanted someone else to share the blame if Caiaphas, the High Priest, thought he got it wrong.

Jesus knows he's being watched. He also knows that God never intended table fellowship to be poisoned by political scheming. Jesus chose to give us the priceless gift of the Eucharist by introducing it at dinner with his friends. Food is one of God's greatest gifts to his children, and it's meant to be freely shared. An invitation to dinner is an invitation into relationship. As the leader of the Pharisees, Jesus's host is perfectly positioned to elevate the dignity of the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind by inviting them over for dinner. By asking him to feed those who cannot reciprocate, Jesus is really asking his host to be the kind of leader God wants in his service. I suspect he's calling us to do the same.

And there's one more thing that Jesus does in this morning's Gospel. Speaking so bluntly to the Pharisee leader and his guests, our LORD very deliberately crosses the lines of social "niceness" that hamper real progress and hinder honest communication. Like the small child in Hans Christian Anderson's story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," Jesus is very good at calling

out our spiritual nakedness. He sees the brainless and heartless things people do when we're trying to impress one another, and he shows us how ugly they are. His observations might not be pleasant, but they're accurate. And how sad is it that the Pharisee and his guests are so lacking in genuine confidence that they can't take a little honest criticism? If the Pharisee, instead of becoming indignant, had laughed and asked Jesus to help him plan his next dinner party, if the powerful religious and military leaders of his day had humbled themselves and been willing to learn from Jesus, perhaps they might not have felt the need to crucify him at all. It may not be immediately obvious, but I believe Jesus is correcting the Pharisee and his guests, not condemning them. He wants them to be present at the resurrection of the righteous. He wants them to be rewarded, so he tells them what they need to do.

Jesus tells us, I believe, to put aside prickly pride and relax into the genuine humility that comes from knowing that we aren't perfect, but we are the beloved children of God. We are enough just as we are. He urges us to share what we have without counting the cost, to give with no expectation of payback. He promises that, if we do, we will join him at the resurrection of the righteous and be rewarded there. What Jesus doesn't mention here, or Luke doesn't record, is something I believe he would still want us to know. We don't have to wait for the resurrection. We can be freed right now from worrying about whether we've climbed high enough up the ladder of success and fretting about what other people really think of us. We can be blessed by friendships with people we might never have known if we're willing to venture outside our "proper" social circles. We can be fearless in speaking out honestly against injustice as our Savior would. We can be humble, generous and authentic. We can be free. What greater blessing could there be? If that's his hostess gift, Jesus is welcome at my table anytime. *Amen.*