

Commentary to the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)



Today's Gospel contains two teachings of similar styles. Both start with when, "When you go to a banquet" and "When you give a banquet." Both have a cautioning phrase, don't. "Don't sit at a high place, lest you be put down," and "Don't put out a spread for the rich to impress them, lest you already receive your reward." And both have the teaching, but, "But when you go to a banquet" and "But when you give a banquet."

The Lord is not playing Miss Manners. He's not giving lessons in proper etiquette. He is teaching us the proper way to view ourselves and others. He is teaching us about honor, respect, and, particularly, about humility.

A number of years ago there was a terrible article in T.V. Guide entitled "You are where you sit." Part of it is as follows:

"In Hollywood you are where you sit. This is called power seating. A strategically placed table indicates to the community your prominent and important position in the industry. It is so important

that major studios assign a full time PR person to make sure the studio doesn't play second fiddle to anyone. One television producer had his secretary call before a meal and politely note that if the table isn't in the right place, her boss wouldn't go. One producer put it this way, 'Information is power. I don't want to be seen seated with two dentists and three veterinarians. It ruins my image. They have nothing to offer me.'”

That is horrible. What is worse is that we are all tempted to do this. Are we concerned with whom we are seen sitting with in the cafeteria, at the business lunch, at a social occasion when there isn't assigned seating? If that is the case, then we need to listen closely to that first instruction.

The first dinner instruction speaks about whom we are before the Lord. We are told that we shouldn't think so highly of ourselves that we put ourselves over other people. Symbolically, we shouldn't move to the best table at the banquet thinking that we are so much better than everyone else.

A number of years ago, before I was at St. Ignatius and before Life Teen even existed, I was very much involved in a youth retreat movement here in Northern Pinellas County, Florida, called COR. There was one young lady, about 20 years old, who gave some of the best talks and most spiritual sharings. One day she told me that she wanted to start a separate prayer group for those who were “really up there” spiritually speaking. I left the discussion thinking, “How can she possibly think that she was spiritually superior to someone else?” Unfortunately, she soon found herself on the other end of the table when she thought it would be acceptable to become sexually active even though she wasn't married.

Similarly, there are many people who imply that are better than others because they have had a spiritual experience or are members of a spiritual support group, "You haven't made this movement, you haven't visited this shrine, well, you're just not up there, spiritually," they say without using words. A truly holy person would never belittle the faith-life of another person. The first dinner instruction encourages us to recognize who we are before the Lord, not to be concerned with making believe we are better than others.

And who are we before the Lord? We are people with gifts and with shortcomings, just like everyone else. Our value, comes from God's gracious gift of His Love to us. What matters is what He has given us, not what we have taken on ourselves. What matters is where He places us at the table of the Banquet of Love, not where we think we should be seated.

The second part of the gospel speaks about honoring people for favors to come later.

During my senior year of college I was invited to a meal that I was surprised to find out was in my honor. It was put on by the parents of one of the Freshmen that I was assigned to supervise in the college-seminary. These people owned a very good restaurant in New York City. I couldn't believe it. The table was stacked high with filet mignons. The meal was more than I could have ever imagined. The parents kept telling me how happy they were that I was supervising their son. They were more lavish in their praises of me than in the food they offered me. I left feeling very good about myself because of all I heard. After all, I had to agree with some of it. (Well, so much for humility on my side.)

About a week later, the young man mentioned to me that when I assign jobs for the Freshmen for the next month, he really didn't want to do anything that would take too long or would be too difficult. I ignored this and gave him whatever job he was in line for. His parents never spoke to me again.

I was not being honored, I was being used.

The second dinner instruction, about not looking for pay-backs, tells us to be sincere. The Christian attitude should be to care genuinely for others, not try to buy them. We need to be concerned with whom others are, not what they can do for us. When we do that we are honoring the Lord who is present within them. Jesus says, "Invite those who cannot repay you." This teaching is in direct contrast to the "What's in it for me mentality," that motivates so many people. Christians are to be different from the people of the world.

The two dinner instructions remind us that we are not the center of the world. God is. Our value does not come from how others view us. Our success is not due to what others can do for us. Our value, our success comes from our relationship to our Center, our God. That is humility.

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