

Proper 17, Year C
August 29, 2010
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
The Rev. Deacon Gabriel Lamazares

Sirach 10:12-18 and Psalm 112 • Hebrews 13:1-8 • Luke 14:1, 7-14

Have I got some news for y'all this morning!

It's very exciting. It turns out that part of the Gospel text for today had been edited out by redactors in the early stages of the composition and copying of the Gospel of Luke. But, thank goodness, some very erudite biblical scholars have located an early, authoritative text that contains the missing bits! I think you'll find that it throws a whole new light on the passage. Here's how it reads (and I'm translating from the Greek now):

“Dear Miss Manners,

I'm fortunate enough to get invited to dinner parties all the time, but I never know where to sit! Should I sit in the seats closest to the host or the ones far away? It's all very awkward and confusing. Please advise.

Signed,
Musical Chairs in Jerusalem”

Seriously?! When did Jesus turn into this advice columnist etiquette guru? Is this the same man who insulted and provoked the powerful, who called a viper a viper and up-ended tables in the Temple sending coins and doves flying? If someone who had never heard of Jesus before came in and heard the Gospel passage today, it would be easy to walk out with that Jesus was a source of practical advice for avoiding thorny social situations.

So let's dig a little deeper. Because of this I am sure: Jesus did not come to make us nice. Jesus came to make us good, to restore us to relationships with God and our neighbor that are worthy and life-giving. And in the immortal words of Stephen Sondheim, “Nice is different than good.”

Jesus could see that, hardwired within each of us, there is a status-seeker that is constantly working, comparing our self to others to figure out where we belong and where we stand in the pecking order. For better or worse, we are related to the other species on earth as close or distant cousins and social hierarchies are a prominent feature of many social animals.

Why have social hierarchies arisen and survived the millions of years, the changes and chances of evolutionary time? Social scientists think it's because they engender peace and stability—of a sort. If we all know where we stand, each pair in the extended social network doesn't have to fight it out on a daily basis over scarce resources. But they exact a price. As anyone who survived high school knows, in order for someone to be at the top, someone has to stay at the bottom. And the empires of the ancient Middle East and Mediterranean made the average contemporary American high school look like a warm, fuzzy group hug.

For an example of what happened to people at the bottom in Ancient Rome, have a look at our stained glass window on my right at the front. The man who uttered these seemingly benign words hangs nailed to a cross as a seditious criminal. Does that look like a man at the top of the heap or at the bottom?

And what's more: he went there *on purpose*. All of his advice to us in the Gospel today points in the direction of reversing and overturning our carefully mapped out and maintained hierarchies. Why? Is it just masochism, a bizarre contest of who can suffer more, who can abuse themselves more, who can be the last to go through a door? (“No, go ahead, please. No, you, I couldn't possibly.”)

I don't think so. *I think he went there to show that God does not accept the price of our dominance hierarchies, the lives stunted and ostracized and lost. He went there to show that a peace bought at the price of cruelty is no peace at all. And he went there to love us into new people from that most wretched place.*

The Commonwealth of God that Jesus preached was no repackaged, new and improved social hierarchy. It was a completely rebuilt network of relationships that find their origin in our love for the one who appeared among his betrayers bearing the scars of violence to breathe upon them and say, "Peace be with you."

That is the only peace worthy of the name, the peace that passes understanding, the peace whose roots are watered not with blood and sweat and tears but with all of the tender vitality of love. In his name, we reach out in love to one another, to the least and the lost, and a new reality comes into being that allows us to participate in the very life of God.

Easy to say, hard to do. I live with a great deal of privilege. If this nation or the world still runs fundamentally on a hierarchy that thrives on cruelty, I am not near the bottom. So often, when I explore the rich, dangerous landscape of the Gospel, I feel as if it's just impossible. "Jesus, the system is the way it is. Living like this is like swimming upstream, going against the grain, tilting at windmills."

But then I look at that man on the cross, and I can't help but love his bravery, his healing wisdom, his compassionate fire, his uncompromising commitment to the truth. And I try again.

A way to begin is to practice downward mobility. (And by practice I mean like you would practice an instrument, by returning to it regularly, coming back when you fail, never giving up.) Fight the impulse to go in the direction of jockeying for higher status. Instead, take the lesser seat, not just literally but metaphorically. In our culture, status is marked as much by where we sit as by what we have and how much we spend for it. Pare down. Simplify. Maybe I don't need the latest iPhone. Maybe a cheaper education at a smaller school is just as good or better for me than the school with the prestige and the big price tag. Maybe the job that I love that doesn't impress anyone is exactly where I need to be, instead of the high-power, high-paying job. If my life is an indication, this won't be easy. If you meet resistance, internal or external, you're probably on the right track.

A great way to do this is to make a regular effort to hang out with, perhaps even eat with, people who are systematically shunted down the ladder, people who because they lack youth or money or beauty or smarts or mobility or emotional stability are left at the gates of our cities, hidden behind walls. Right here at St. Michael's, we prepare and share a meal with all kinds of folks on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays. If you are already among the blessed who do this, tell someone else how awesome and vital and life-giving it is. Tell them how it's not always tidy or nice, but it's *good* and exciting and disorienting, like a new world coming to birth.

What will that new world look like? Pay close attention to what happens here today; we gather at this Table to rehearse it. It looks like speaking and singing, listening and silence, remembering and interceding, thanksgiving and invitation, giving and receiving. At this Table, there is a place set for everyone and every outstretched hand receives the bread of heaven from another hand. Our Host took the lowest seat in order to sit with us. Won't you join him?