

GRACIOUS LIVING - GOD'S WAY

*Mary Ann Pastuck
Camrose United Church
August 29, 2004*

The Rev. John Claypool, an Episcopal priest, who is the professor of preaching for the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, GA., told a story about an interesting detail that reminded him that for all the ways we humans have changed there are certain habits that continue to persist and need to be challenged by the vision of reality Jesus came into the world to embody.

The detail to which he referred was a practice when the stagecoach was the main means of transportation in the Wild West. The vehicles back then were relatively small. At most, they carried six passengers. However, there were still classes that were recognized. Tickets were sold just like today on modern airlines, in different classes. The distinction, however, did not have to do with the size of the seat or the kind of food that was served, but rather what was expected of the ticket holder in case the stagecoach got into a difficult situation like a deep bog of mud or an incline to steep to be able to negotiate.

It turns out that there were three types of tickets sold. The first class, which, of course, was the most expensive, entitled the ticket owner to remain in the stagecoach no matter what conditions might be faced. When you got the most expensive ticket, what this meant was that if difficulty arose, you were exempt from having to put forth any kind of effort. A second class ticket meant that if difficulty arose, you had to get out and walk alongside the coach until the difficulty could be resolved. The cheapest ticket – the third class one – called on the holder to take responsibility for the difficulty. This meant they not only had to get out of the coach when there was a problem, but they also had to, alongside the driver, get down in the mud and do whatever had to be done so the vehicle could either get through the mud or get up the hill. They were required what today we would call “sweat equity” as part of being a third class ticket holder. Needless to say, this was the least prestigious of all the categories.

The Rev. John Claypool went on to say that when he first learned of this practice on the stagecoach, he remembered thinking that this is reflective of our human nature, namely, to equate the category of first class with privilege and being exempt from having to do the most menial kinds of work. And at the same time, it dawned on him how radically different Jesus' hierarchy of values were. When he came to live upon the earth, Jesus had a very different interpretation to this metaphor of first class. In the most literal sense, he turned the value system of the world upside down and dared to say that in God's eyes the really first-class reality was not the privilege of having everything done for you, but rather lay in a willingness to do the opposite and assume the role of a servant who is willing to deal with the difficulty and is more concerned to solve a problem than to be waited on by others. I believe this is what our scripture lessons; particularly the gospel is getting at.

Our Gospel reading starts out by telling us Jesus was invited to dinner at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. Right away we should know that something's up here. What's a decent, up-standing Pharisee doing inviting someone like Jesus for dinner?

There is no way Jesus should be on this guest list. Seems like he doesn't even qualify for third class.

Marcus Borg, the New Testament scholar, tells us that eating together, in Jesus' day was a very significant act. There were strict social conventions and rules – many of them buoyed by the teachings of the church, that set boundaries on who one might ever eat with. One was not supposed to eat with those who did not follow the holiness code, who might put impure food, thus breaking kosher rules, on the table. One was not supposed to eat with the unclean. One was not supposed to eat with sinners or the sick or gentiles. And, one was not supposed to eat with anyone without thereby making some kind of pledge of friendship and fidelity. The intimacies of the table were thought to forge a bond of acceptance and trust that could never, later be betrayed.

The Pharisees, as a people who took all such laws very seriously, who paraded about bragging of their holiest observance of every title and dot of the law, they of all people, should not have invited Jesus at all – except that it suited their ulterior purposes.

We have to remember that we are in the 14th chapter of Luke's gospel as we read this story and, many a time before this, the Pharisees and Jesus have clashed. By this point the Pharisees are quite openly out to trap Jesus in some fine point of law so as to find excuse to bring charges against him and discredit him. Blasphemy, one of the most serious charges was their preferred option: and, many of these same Pharisees thought already that Jesus was guilty of that. In their eyes, Jesus was already a sinner and so what are they doing inviting him to eat with them? In the past they've gone after Jesus for eating with "tax-collectors and sinners" hoping to make Jesus look bad; but, now, sinner or not, they want him on their territory and dinner invitation seemed like a good way to set their plot in motion. So, no doubt, much to Jesus' astonishment, he's invited: and, he comes.

And, right away, as soon as Jesus arrived, chapter 2 of the Pharisees plot clicked into gear. Out of the blue, as the dinner crowd assembled suddenly there stands a man, in front of Jesus and the gathered guests, who has dropsy – an obvious swelling and inflammatory disease. We didn't read that part of the story. This "sick" "unclean" man shouldn't have been on the guest list either! And, chances are, he wasn't. He may have been a plant – a pot of pre-dinner entertainment so to speak. The game was to get this man in Jesus' face and see what he would do – this "so called" rabbi who went around healing everyone. All the Pharisees knew the game plan and they were watching Jesus closely to see how he handled the situation. Brashly overlooking the reality that they themselves had violated the Sabbath rules twice by this point, they all hoped Jesus would get himself in trouble – performing work – a healing on the Sabbath: in violation of their interpretation of the law.... They were ready to pounce.

One commentator, at this point suggests that Jesus might well have avoided the trap laid for him by simply telling the sick man to come back and see him tomorrow. Remembering last week's reading, we already know Jesus is not going to do that. It's not as if the man was in mortal danger or great pain or anything like that. There was no urgency for this healing; but Jesus deliberately takes the bait. He heals the guy and then, when challenged, does not back away. He asks the Pharisees whose law it is that dictates that one should not do a healing on the Sabbath.

Jesus knows that there is not one word of scripture that the Pharisees can counter with because the Pharisees are acting on an interpretation made up for pious observance by the Pharisees themselves.

The bigger question behind what Jesus asks is obvious. "What's the law here? Is it God's or is it yours?"

Devious plots are powerful when they come off in silence: but called and named for what they are, they do tend to shed an honest light on their perpetrators.

Immediately casting his eyes about the room, Jesus finds another illustration by which to hammer home his point. Jesus sees the guests heading for tables, maneuvering to win at the pecking order game. This game is also controlled by the Pharisees. The host Pharisee gets to decide on exactly how important or righteous or deserving each and every guest is. Those judged superior will be placed near the head table; and those judged inferior will be posted to the rear. So you want to bet that proceeding the time of seating there haven't been all kinds of games being played? Each guest trying to ingratiate themselves to the host, reminding the host of their importance, hinting at the old "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" kind of play. Makes one think of all kinds of little games played in our society today. I'll put you at the head table next week if you put me up front right now... Protocol, for which the Pharisees, not the Bible, set the rules, was a powerful tool. And, as Jesus saw it, a strange way to manipulate and hang on to power. This is not gracious living – God's way. And, it makes Jesus angry.

In a marvelously sarcastic parody of what he saw going on in the room, Jesus speaks to the issue of seating in places of honor. "When you are invited to an important dinner," Jesus suggests, if you want to avoid embarrassment and really be noticed, be sure to take a seat at the back. That way, when the host notices, he or she will, no doubt, make a bit of a fuss, creating a scene that draws attention, putting you in the spotlight, as the host comes and escorts you up the social ladder to a higher place."

Jesus goes on then to speak to the host about who has been invited. "When you give a dinner, don't invite those who you expect will invite you in return and thus pay you back so to say thus keeping the social ladder intact. But invite those who are poor, crippled, blind, lame. You will be blessed because they cannot repay you but you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Immediately following today's reading we come to the Parable of the Great Dinner, which serves as Jesus' final denunciation of the behavior of the Pharisees. Through the parable Jesus warns everyone present that the end of their self-serving games playing will be their demise. They are so busy looking after themselves that their whole community shatters and self-destructs. No one has time for anyone or anything but that which serves themselves. In the end, people who behave like this, will end up hungry, lonely and maybe even outside the fellowship of anyone including the church. Harsh words with so much truth.

In our reading today, Jesus was certainly anything but "nice" or "polite". He pulled no punches when he was faced with the Pharisees trying to take advantage of him and the sick man and the other assembled "yes" folk who were really there to pay homage to the host each attempting to barter, looking for a favour in return, back table people swelling the numbers so the host would look popular and powerful indeed. Jesus through his words and actions tells us this is not the way to be at God's table.

In the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus uses the "rhetoric of reversal." Once again, we are called to turn the world upside down and see through Christological lenses that the least really are the greatest, and the greatest would do well to practice humility, humility meaning the quality or state of being humble.

Both the parable and the epistle lesson speak about meeting people where they are, as they are, and loving them without reservation – now. Not when they change, or get their acts together, or buy a nice suit, but now. This is gracious hospitality, gracious living God's way and we are called to make it our own. Sometimes that means being called to share Jesus' decisive action exercising "tough love" for the good of everyone. It may not be "nice" but it may be "right."

Our efforts to reach out with Christ's love are support and enabled by these words, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Trusting in this promise, we can truly live graciously - God's way. Amen.