

Sermon for 29 August 2010
Pentecost 14; Proper 17, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The biblical scholar and erstwhile bishop of Durham N.T. Wright once wrote that "Jesus didn't come to give good advice." He wasn't an early precursor to Dear Abbey or the self-help movement; he came to reveal the truth of God and to die for mankind, not to give us helpful pointers.

That said, Jesus' words in this morning's Gospel might at first strike us as nothing but good advice. Actually, he sounds a bit like Miss Manners:

When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

How embarrassing! You arrive thinking you're the guest and you get shuffled off to the "kiddie table".

If we take Jesus' words in context, though, I think we'll find that there's a lot more here than tips for effecting social propriety. If you'll look at your bulletin inserts, at the Gospel reading, you might notice something strange about the passage we read this morning. "Luke 14:1, 7-14. It skips six whole verses. If I might give a tip, I'd suggest that one always be a little bit suspicious when the lectionary cuts bits out of the readings. Sometimes it cuts out the nasty bits—you know, the wrath of God and all that—and sometimes it cuts out bits for some other editorial reason. So, here's what we didn't hear in the Gospel:

One sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. Then he took him and healed him, and let him go. And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.

Why was this cut out of this morning's reading? Well, I don't know anybody who was on the committee that revised the lectionary, but I have a hunch. The section that was cut out sounds an awful lot like last week's Gospel reading. It's not; it's a whole chapter later in Luke. Just like in last week's Gospel, Jesus is calling out the hypocrisy of the fashionably religious, who at this point had become a little less willing to criticize him for his apparent Sabbath-breaking. Anyway, the story is so similar to last week's Gospel, that I suspect that those who revised the lectionary didn't want the repetition, fearing we'd lose interest or get confused about what week were in or something.

In all events, it's a shame that these six verses have been excised, because it's these six verses that provide the context for Jesus' words which immediately follow it, and which saves that text from sounding like Miss Manners.

This man with dropsy was, we can assume, not invited to the dinner party. He just kind of shows up and disappears, like a plot device. He provides Jesus a teachable moment, though, which Jesus then avails himself of by means of the parable about table manners.

What would not have occurred to the Pharisees until that night—and what would not have occurred to us if we didn't have the six omitted verses—was that maybe this poor man with dropsy deserved the place of honor, and they were all taking it from him. They were likely not malicious, but they were probably simply ignorant of those outside their circle.

That can happen to us, too. Our own comfort with "our sort of people" can keep us from seeing everybody who deserves a place at the table. When we permit discomfort with those we consider unlovely to blind us to their very existence, we can pretty easily exclude them from the party.

The church does that, you know. Sometimes churches pretty explicitly exclude people that make them uncomfortable, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about when church people don't even notice those they don't consider "our kind of people." They don't consider that somebody who is "not like us" should be invited to supper at God's Table. But if we were really paying attention to the Gospel, then we'd know that "those kind of people" are going to be given the places of honor at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, that the lowly and the ignored and the despised are going to be faring better in eternity than the "in-crowd".

We've got to wake up and open our eyes to see those to whom we were blind. We've got to be able to see the people whom we've ignored, but whom God loves just as much. I know that I've been as guilty as anyone of failing in that regard. I've been guilty of thinking "he wouldn't really fit in, would he?" Well, friends, that's sin motivating me,

not love. This isn't a supper club, it's the Church of God, so let's all be a little more willing to open up those red doors which symbolize sanctuary and acceptance. Let's be a little more willing to open up to people that aren't like us, knowing that as Christians all people are "our kind of people", or at least we ought to see them like that, not just those who look like us, or dress like us, or use the same kind of language, or have the same ideas about things. If we start doing that, we might not be as surprised when we get to that great feast in that kingdom which is to come, who else is going to be at dinner.

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Amen.