

Proper 17, Year C

St. Barnabas, 2022

Lk. 14:1,7-14

The story is told of a young mother lecturing her six-year-old son on the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” She concluded her lecture with the words, “Always remember that we are in this world to help others.” The youngster mulled this over for a minute and then asked, “What are the others here for?”

What ARE the others here for: the more distinguished, as described by Jesus in this morning’s gospel, the ones because of whom we’re making our way to the lowest seat at the table? And what about the marginalized, the poor and unfortunate, the lame, the blind, the unemployed, the refugees, those who cannot ever pay us back? What does this morning’s Gospel mean when it says those of us who THINK we’ve been working hard to do all the right things will be humbled, and those others will be exalted?

Today’s scene opens at a dinner table, the traditional setting for philosophical discussions in the Greco-Roman world. On a superficial level it might appear that Jesus is giving a lecture on manners or table etiquette, but the subject under consideration is not really proper behavior at a dinner party. No, the topic is reversal, and we’ve heard this topic before in several manifestations. Jesus reframes humanity’s ideas about honor, dignity, and worthiness. As Mary proclaimed in the Magnificat and we have sung for generations at Evening Prayer, “He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek” [Luke 1:52]. Or the words of Simeon at the presentation of Jesus in the Temple come to mind: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many” [Luke 2:34]. On the day after his transfiguration, Jesus brings a little child to his side and says, “The least among all of you is the greatest” [Luke 9:48]. And today’s declaration [Luke 14:11] will not be the final one. We will hear again “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” [Luke 18:14], and “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” [Luke 22:26]. You might say the subtitle of Luke’s gospel is “The Great Reversal.” So why is this reversal necessary?

In the Hellenistic world in which Jesus and his disciples lived, humility was considered a vice, not a virtue; and we don’t have to look very far to find examples in our own society of the exchange of the virtue humility for vice. Just as we do, Jesus’ Gentile contemporaries extolled status, role, and accomplishment as the measures of human worth. Their ambition was exaltation and the rewards that come with hustling. So they were shocked to hear humility held up as a virtue. What’s more, there’s just the suggestion that even those who thought they were doing all

the right things, the Pharisees, were in for a come-down. Jesus confronts them, and us, with two parallel sayings, not really parables but counsels; and His warning or counsel is about choices, choices far more significant than places at the dinner table.

He begins by taking the teachings of ancient Israel a step further than did such wise men as the authors of Proverbs or Ecclesiasticus: He does not simply admonish his disciples, then and now, to avoid the snares of pride and arrogance. He's pressing a deeper point. He does warn his followers that real honor comes not from self-seeking choices but from what is bestowed on one by another. He does direct our attention to the proper mode of conduct toward other human beings. But today's reversals are slightly different from Jesus' other depictions of a topsy-turvy world in which the first will be last and the last, first. Our lack of control over the outcome of acclaim is the same; but in this scene Jesus indicates that choices are expected of us, choices that are the reverse of normal expectations, choices that are necessary for our salvation.

At first reading, it appears that the initial difficulty is knowing how to make our best choices humbly without trying to be best at being humble! There is something about this exchange that reminds me of the little voice within that says, "Your best is not good enough." There is something within us that fears we will be standing behind Mother Teresa in the final judgment line and will hear God tell her, "You know, you should have done more." If those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted, what is the secret to choosing wisely?

The first clue to the secret is to study the hard and fast realities of human life as Jesus knew them in Palestine over 2,000 years ago. His audience consisted largely of practicing Jews, people who were trying their best to do the right thing according to the laws of the Hebrew faith. So on one level, Jesus is saying, "Simply following the rules to EARN your way to the kingdom is not going to do it. Only something superior to the law can gain you admission to that land of peace and freedom, and admission is not yours to manage." Put another way, to choose something superior to the law is to choose to go beyond that law. How is going beyond possible?

A number of years ago, we were house guests of an extremely wealthy man and his wife. On the wall of the bedroom where we slept was a sampler cross-stitched by our hostess, and the words on the sampler were particularly poignant. They read, in part, "Choose life...only that, and always...Choose life...only that, and always."

I wondered what those words meant. Choose what's oen to the future? Choose the unknown? Even, choose risk?

The words on the sampler seemed poignant because there in a house filled with all the signs of achievement, all the signatures of wealth, a home filled with opulence and security, one

still reminded herself daily to choose life. At first I thought it would be easy for one who no longer needed to worry about financial security to slip into an unreal world that shielded her from the unexpected, protected her from challenge, removed her from life itself. For most of us, choosing life is a matter of sheer survival. Most of us have no need to look for new challenges. We are busy just coping with the challenges that come our way. Is that what Jesus meant when he cautioned us not to appeal to a spirit of material gain, a hope of reward? Could he just as easily have said, "Gird yourself for battle!" Or even, "Cope!" Or did he mean something more, as did the author of the sampler.

The month of September is a good example of how you and I respond to the challenges of life. For September marks the end of summer holidays for government, business, schools, organizations, the end of your summer holiday and mine. In a variety of ways, we acknowledge the completion of a season of life and the necessity of gathering our resources to confront the tasks ahead. Summer's days of ease and relaxation must serve us in the time ahead. In a symbolic sense, we harvest our energies as we prepare for the coming days; for this is a time of year when the tempo of life picks up, activities increase, pressures intensify. And a myriad of demands contribute to those pressures.

All kinds of voices clamor for our time and attention: Advertisements of opera, symphony, and theater seasons arrive in the mail daily to offer us more leisure time activities than we could possibly indulge. Responsibilities we welcome present themselves, both at home and on the job. Other activities we assume strictly because they are required of us, like check-ups and taxes. There are a host of details to manage.

Just last week a friend and I were discussing a project that promised to be exciting; and he said, "When things get back to normal, I hope to have time for that." Then he stopped himself and reflected, "Maybe this is normal."

Yes, in my own experience and the experiences related by many other individuals, pressure is normal. That pressure may be found in periods of gain and seasons of loss---the gain and loss of love, wealth, even physical health; when in the midst of both gain and loss, there continue to be urgent demands on our attention. Whether we consider these pressures to be opportunities or threats depends in part on time and security. But in either case---whether the pressure be for good or ill---there is a choice for us to make, the choice of our response to that pressure.

Choices can be made. Indeed, choices must be made. This morning's gospel causes us to examine why it is that we allow ourselves to feel such pressure in our choices and compels us to ask whether the pressure we feel is one of time, of security, or of misplaced values.

Each of us has certain things he or she wants to do, certain aims that benefit us physically, spiritually, and sometimes materially. Achieving those goals gives us a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and well-being. No one would question that the completion of a task has value. But there are spiritually satisfying goals which hold value for us as well: the power to make decisions, the respect of others for the decisions we've made, the esteem accorded a person whose manner of living is admirable, the affection of friends, the love of family. The possession of any of these spiritual goals we value highly.

And yet we hear today from Jesus that we must give up not only the possession of power but even our attachment to the love of others. In other words, pressure to do our best and, more than that, to excel, to achieve is living at a level that is less than life in all its fullness. Jesus is pressing a deeper point, pushing us to go to a level where real life emerges. And so we ask ourselves, "How can this be? Can our values be so opposed to those of our Lord?" No, Jesus is telling us that to choose something other than honor is to choose something MORE than possessions, be those possessions fame or security or even love. To choose wisely is to exercise our freedom to be choosing human beings, not simply responders toward whom life rushes in constant confrontation. To choose life is to choose in the midst of gain or loss to go beyond the law, to choose what is good for the other, to choose to hope for the future, and to recognize in all humility our need of God.

The dictionary will not tell you, but the Bible will, that to choose a life of humility is to acknowledge one's need of God. The world erects for us two signs: The arrow on one sign reads, "This way to lectures about God." The other arrow reads, "This way to God." The first sign leads to crowded byways, while the second draws only a few. Why? Because lectures about God are knowable. The way to God is not. The way to God is risky. It requires self exposure. It requires living with open hands, open hearts, and no guarantees in this life. But the path to God is the way of true blessedness, for the way to God is the way to life.

Teilhard de Chardin described that choice in this way: "Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world, mankind will have discovered fire."

The energies of love take their seat at the foot of the table. The energies of love host a banquet for which no one can ever repay. The energies of love propel us down the path to God.