

## Becoming Real

At first glance, today's gospel seems more like something you'd expect to hear from Dear Abby or Miss Manners than from Jesus.

After all, at first glance, it seems Jesus is giving some good advice on how not to be seen as a social duff: don't presume to take the best seat, instead take the worst seat and wait to be invited up.

But the clue that this is neither Dear Abby nor Miss Manners comes when Luke tells us that this is a parable.

When you see the word "parable," think, a sock in the eye or a kick to the rear-end.

Parables are intended to shake us up, if we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear.

So let's take this parable a little further, and imagine that the fellow takes Jesus' advice and sits in the peanut gallery, but he's secretly hoping to be invited up front, only to have the host whisper in his ear: "Glad to see you where you belong!"

Or, imagine that the fellow takes his place at the back and discovers that he actually likes the folks he's sitting with, they're looser and funnier than the uptight crowd sitting at the front table.

Either way, the fellow who was so wrapped up in his own ego is now cracked open, and perhaps able to see himself, and those around him, with new, more authentic, eyes.

It's like the wise African American man who gave his life to civil rights, retired now and traveling in Georgia, and every time he and his wife go to a restaurant, they're seated right next to the restrooms.

And every time, the man laughs, saying they must really love us here, because waterfront property is the best!

It's like Anthony Hopkins, the famous actor who played Hannibal Lector and so many other great roles, reflecting about fame and wealth as he turned 70.

"When you're young," he says, "you crave power and fame.

Now I know it's no big deal.

I get up and look in the mirror and say, 'oh, it's you again.'" Preaching Through the Year, Luke, 74.

Maybe that's part of what Jesus is getting at today, holding up a mirror to our silly efforts to look sharp, to feel important, to climb to the top of whatever ladder is standing in front of us: the social ladder, the business ladder, the political ladder.

Because what so many discover after reaching the top of those ladders, is that they're leaning against the wrong wall.

Flannery O'Connor, the brilliant southern writer was once asked why her characters are so grotesque, so ugly and exaggerated.

"Because you need those kinds of folks so that the blind can see," she says.

Meaning, I think, that we all of us get so wrapped up in our own narrowly defined worlds of what is copacetic and what isn't, that it takes a lot to wake us up to who and what we really are; to shake us loose from our limited assumptions, to be open to the healing craziness that is the free grace of the living God.

These assumptions that we live inside of so easily become prisons, prisons of other people's expectations, prisons of our own sense of not measuring up, prisons of holding tight to our stuff.

And the funny thing is that the key to unlocking these prisons is right here, in my own hand...

Perhaps that's some of what Jesus is getting at this morning, and maybe he's getting at something else too.

In a little while, during the Eucharist, we will all start praying the Agnes Dei, Latin for the Lamb of God.

I thought for the longest time that when we prayed: "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world..." that "sin" meant my naughtiness, my lies, infidelities, angers and a whole long list of words or deeds that we commonly call "bad."

But the longer I pray that prayer the more I think that maybe "the sin of the world" that Jesus comes to remove is something quite different.

Maybe "the sin of the world" is not so much our short-comings as it is our self-sufficiency, our "go it alone" mentality, all of which is as American as apple pie.

And so our striving, whether it's for the best seat at the table or the corner office in the corporation, it's all rooted in self-sufficiency, and when our roots are sunk deep into self-sufficiency, we aren't rooted in God.

No wonder so many feel alienated and adrift in our world today.

We have become disconnected from the source of who we are, disconnected from the One in whose image we are made.

This is what Jesus is getting at when they ask him if it's lawful to pay tax to Caesar.

"Whose image is on the coin?" He asks.

"Caesar's!" They reply.

"Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's."

Meaning: you bear the image of God!

So give to God what belongs to God.

Give to God your very self.

The thing that keeps me from doing just that is my fear that if I don't look out for myself, who will?

And Jesus replies:

"Go to the exchange window and trade in the heresy that says 'God helps those who help themselves' for an armful of undeserved grace.

My death on the cross and my resurrection assure you that it is safe to do just that.

And then, jump in the pool of that grace, by turning normal social invitations on their heads.

Don't invite the guy who's likely to return the favor, invite the folks who can never return the favor, and you'll find favor with God, because God's doing exactly that for YOU every day!"

Of course, this is as big a challenge today as it was the moment these words first left Jesus' lips.

There's the story of the new rector who decides to see just how welcoming his new church actually is.

Mission statements are one thing, living out those statements in real life is another.

So this new Rector lives on the streets for awhile, not bathing, unshaved, and getting pretty grubby.

Then he comes to church that Sunday and takes his seat in a pew, where he is first asked to move, because he's sitting in somebody else's seat.

Then someone suggests he sits in the back because he doesn't exactly smell like roses.

Then, the word is given that maybe this isn't really the right place for him ... so he leaves ... only to return the following Sunday to share the experience of his first Sunday with his new, now totally mortified congregation!

How and who we welcome has been an issue in religious life for forever.

In 300 AD, this instruction was given to the bishops overseeing newly formed Christian churches:

"If a destitute man or woman, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is no place, you, bishop, make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground, that you may not show favoritism among human beings, but that your ministry may be pleasing before God."

On the other hand, the Qumran community, a group of Jewish mystics who lived in the desert in hopeful expectation of the kingdom of God, said this:

“And let no person ... with any impurity whatever enter the Assembly of God.

And every person ... paralyzed in his hands and feet, lame or blind or deaf, or dumb ... or any aged person that totters: let those persons not enter.” The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 8, p. 287.

We are children of a funny God.

For reasons she doesn’t share, she has a soft heart for the confused, the lost, the bewildered.

And maybe, just maybe, if I hold that mirror up to my face, and take a long look at “oh, ... it’s you again,” ... maybe the one who’s staring back is also confused, lost and bewildered, desperately needing the embrace of the living God.... this God who refuses to give up on anyone, even on me, even on you.

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