

The Mirror

Proverbs 25:6-7 Psalm 112 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1, 7-14

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 idiot: 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, while secretly hoping to be invited up front, and the host bends down and whispers in his ear: "Glad to see you finally found the seat 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 stiffs sitting at the front table.

Both of these possibilities have the possibility of kind of cracking open the fellow who was so focused on his ego that he forgot to laugh!

It's like the wise old 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 sit them by the restrooms.

The man laughs, saying they must really love us here, because everyone knows waterfront property is the most desirable!

It's like the famous actor Anthony Hopkins, the guy who played Hannibal Lector and so many other great roles, who was reflecting on his 7th decade, about fame and wealth...

"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 one

frequently discovers after reaching the top of those ladders,, they're often 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, our own small alley ways 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 God.

These assumptions that we live inside of so easily become prisons, prisons of other people's expectations, prisons of our own hyper-criticism of self and others, prisons of needing to buy or look good or just keep up with the Jones'.

And the funny thing is that the key to the lock of 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, you know, my lies, infidelities, angers and a whole long list of acts or thoughts that we commonly say are "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 independence, 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, is 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, because we have become disconnected from the source of who we are, disconnected from the image after whom we are created.

When they tried to set Jesus up by asking if it's lawful to pay tax to Caesar, the beauty of Jesus' response — "who's image is on the coin? — Caesar's! — then give to Caesar what is

Caesar's and give to God what is God's".....means that **you bear** the image of God, so give to God what belongs to God: **your very self.**

You know, if we don't look out for number one, we have to trust that someone else will.

Which is why Jesus invites us to go to the exchange window and trade in "God helps those who help themselves" for an arm full of undeserved grace.

Nor is Jesus quite done yet.

Because today's lesson ends with Jesus turning normal social invitations on their head, when he says: "don't invite the guy who's likely to return the favor, invite the folks who can never return the favor, if you want to find favor with God."

And 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 check into the welcoming nature of his new church by doing the unexpected.

He stays outdoors for several days, living on the streets, not bathing, unshaved, and getting pretty grubby.

He then 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 asked to sit toward the back because he doesn't exactly smell like fresh flowers, then eventually someone suggests maybe this isn't really the right place for him to be after all ... 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 ... in the midst of the Congregation: 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.

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