

PECULIAR CHRISTIAN ETHICS – HUMILITY

Year C, Proper 12, August 29, 2004

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Have you ever noticed how much we learn about the dinner table? Families and friends love to share stories when we are gathered. We learn about life, values and more. It was the same in Jesus' time. He did significant teaching around meals, whether it be with disciples or others. What we have today is another teaching around a meal. We come together each Sunday to gather around a table, to eat and learn.

I'd like to share another table story. It comes from the "Book of Virtues" by the Brothers Grimm. Once upon a time there once lived a feeble woman whose husband died and left her alone. She went to live with her son, his wife and their own little daughter. Every day, the old woman's sight dimmed and her hearing grew worse. Sometimes at dinner her hands trembled so badly the peas rolled off her spoon or soup ran from her cup. The son and wife became annoyed at the way she spilled her meal all over the table. One day, after she knocked over a glass of milk, they told each other that enough was enough.

They set up a small table for her in a corner next to the broom closet. They made the old woman eat her meals there. She sat all alone, looking with tear-filled eyes across the room at the others. Sometimes they spoke to her while they ate. But usually it was to scold her for dropping a bowl or fork. One evening, just before dinner, the little girl was busy playing with her building blocks on the floor. Her father asked her what she was making. "I'm building a little table for you and mother," she smiled, "so you can eat by yourselves in the corner when I get big."

Her parents sat staring at her for some time. Then suddenly both began to cry. That night they led the old woman back to her place at the big table. From then on, she ate with the rest of the family. The son and his wife never seemed to mind a bit when she spilled every now and then. We can learn a lot at the dinner table.

The Gospel talks about Jesus at the dinner table. Professor William Willimon, of Duke Seminary, says we had better watch out! Like the little girl, Jesus will bring us up short. Jesus is upsetting. He's the "difficult" guest when invited into our lives! Jesus shows us that the King of God rules are very different from those that we and world live by. Jesus upsets us at the table.

It is here, at the table, that Jesus provides us his most significant teaching. Jesus is attacking the self-seeking attitudes of the guests and the host. We hear that the Pharisees have gathered and they are jostling for the highest place at the dinner table. What was the motivation to invite Jesus to dinner? It seems to be self-interest. You can almost hear them now, "Oh yes, we had that Jesus fellow over the other night."

The main motivation for most of our behavior is self-interest. It was the same for the Pharisees and is the same for us. So often we call our self-seeking "comfort, security, or rights." We think we "owed" or have "earned" what we seek. It is this

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attitude that Jesus attacks at deep level. This is what the table discussion is all about.

For us, as Christians, the discussion moves from our tables to the Lord's table. I'm talking about Holy Communion. It is here that we meet and eat with Jesus. We can expect surprises! Jesus is still the challenging person whether guest or host. What we meet at this table is a savior who means to change us in order to save us. Jesus is not about affirming our lifestyle, attitudes or values. It's about our becoming disciples of Jesus.

We get an indication about what this passage is about earlier in the Gospel of Luke. In Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-55) we hear that the mighty and proud will be brought down and the lowly lifted up. Jesus attacks the Pharisees because they longed so to be "on top." Jesus brings down those who are on top and brings up those who make up the bottom. Those who we exclude, Jesus invites to the table.

The issue at the bottom of this discussion is pride. My New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller, pointed out that our pride is spelled out in Luke. It hearkens back to the passage in Ecclesiastes. Pride makes us think that we don't need God. In our arrogance, we don't think we need anyone. We are warned that such a deadly sin will be pulled down by God.

Jesus replies to pride by calling us to be humble. He says it's about our relationship with God. Jesus invites everyone, not just those we live. How will we respond to God? We must renounce any claim of merit. Jesus tells us that salvation is an unmerited gift. God gives us grace not because we are good people, not because we live the right lives. God saves us because God loves us. It does matter how we receive, accept and treat others says Jesus. This will be what God uses to shape the divine response to us.

What the Jesus calls us to today is a life of a peculiar ethic. We are called to be humble. It's a way of life. It is the Christian way of life. Jesus tells us that our relationship with God can be deepen if we identify and respond to the poor and needy. I read recently that the number of poor in the country increased to 13 million. Half of those poor are children. The same article reported that one out of four children in this country are without health care. How is it that in a country that is the richest on the planet that these things can happen? How is it that we can allow these things to exist? The world scene is even more dismal.

It is time for us to overcome self-interest in favor of "other" interest. Most people in this town know us as the "pretty church." Is that how we wish to be known? Will that satisfy God? What about the people in the Church? Who are we? Maybe we need to spend more time on building a reputation of being a caring, Christian community. Perhaps we would do better to embrace mission rather than materials. We have work to do, and it starts here with us.

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The Spanish Language Camp met here two weeks ago. One of the teens from a Hispanic church in Camden came to help us. As she approached Grace Church, she said, “What a pretty Church ... Oh no! I can’t go in there. I’m not dressed right. I don’t belong in there.” Is this how we want to be viewed and remember? We must look with a critical eye at ourselves and see how unfriendly and unchristian we are. We have to learn to be humble. It begins when we recognize that we need Jesus, we need God and we need each other.

So, tell me this ... how will we be recognized in the community?