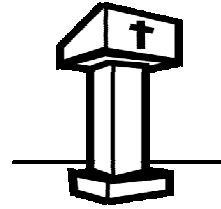


Sermon Synopsis -
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2010
by the Rev. Peter Champion



I have to confess that I'm an inveterate reader of Miss Manners. You know who I'm talking about—the syndicated etiquette columnist in the Contra Costa Times. She's the one who deals with complicated questions like what to do when someone uses the fish fork instead of the salad fork, or who is an appropriate hostess for a bridal or baby shower.

At first reading, Jesus' words this morning sound like he was dispensing advice on wedding banquet. And his advice is right in line with the traditions of his time and place. "Don't presume that you're entitled to a place at the head table, because it is embarrassing to be told that someone more important is coming and will be taking your seat" is sensible advice. In fact what he says is almost straight out of the Book of Proverbs, so nobody there could dispute his advice, even if they didn't like the fact that it was directed at them personally.

If this was the sum total of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel today, we'd have had a nice sermon about humility. But in the second part of the Gospel, Jesus makes a much edgier set of remarks. And it is those remarks I want to look at in a little more depth.

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:13-14)

Here, what Jesus is saying goes counter to common expectations. After all, don't we give lunches or dinners or banquets so we can get together with family and friends and neighbors? If we aren't going to invite them, why bother with a party at all? What is Jesus' point here?

In the Bible, banquets and feasts and meals are often metaphors for God's reign, God's kingdom. What Jesus is doing in this Gospel is inviting us to use the question of who to invite for a meal as a means to reflect on who is important in God's eyes.

What Jesus is saying in these three sentences is that our sense of who is important is very different from God's. We think the rich and the familiar are more important. But Jesus reminds us that God has a special place in the divine heart for those whom the world devalues. The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind... God has special concern for those who can't help themselves, and we are invited to share God's concern.

Many years ago, I took a group of kids from our church youth group into Buffalo, New York to help prepare and serve a meal in the basement of an old, rundown leaky Episcopal Church in one of the poorer neighborhoods of this

rustbelt city. We arrived and helped sort through the lettuce and tomatoes and carrots that the grocery stores had donated instead of tossing into the dumpster. We helped cook large pans of macaroni. And we set the tables for our guests that evening. When we opened the door, in flowed a line of people, and as they sat down we began to serve them their meals. No cafeteria line there; instead, they had servers to bring them their meals, just like they were in a restaurant instead of what was called the “family kitchen.” After all the guests had been served, we were invited to get plates of food, find empty seats in the dining room, and have our dinner with the guests.

Now one of the girls in the youth group was named Mindy. I don’t think Mindy had understood exactly what we’d be doing. She showed up in heels and nylons, a nice dress, her face nicely made up and her hair perfect. The rest of us were dressed in jeans, tee shirts and tennies. When Mindy sat down to eat, she sat next to a very polite and pleasant man who pretty obviously was dealing with a mental illness of some sort. I think Mindy was a bit uncomfortable—not quite sure that showing up had been such a good idea, and a bit freaked out by her dinner companion. But Mindy, to use a martial metaphor, soldiered on.

After we’d all finished dinner, Mindy joined the rest of us in clearing the tables for our guests. As she walked back towards the kitchen, her dinner companion stood up and called out, “Mindy, turn around!” As she did, arms stacked with dirty plates, the man held his hand out in front of him, made the sign of the cross, and loudly and emphatically said, “Mindy, God bless you!”

My question for us is this—who was blessed in that encounter I’ve just described? Were the guests blessed by our willingness to help cook for and serve them? Or were we the ones who were blessed by the opportunity to serve those for whom God has a special love and concern?

Of course, we and the guests were all blessed by this encounter. But I think the point of Jesus’ story is that we, the well-off, received the more important blessing. We learned that the most important people in that family kitchen were not us, but **“the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.”** And we were blessed by their allowing us to serve them.

For nearly 20 years, I’ve wondered what it was that prompted Mindy to get so dressed up. On my way out here this morning, it hit me. Mindy, at some level she wasn’t able to articulate, was the only one among us to see that our guests were the guests of honor, and that they deserved the very best we could give them.

A priest mentor of mine many years ago was fond of stating that we are “blessed to be a blessing.” I’ve always heard that phrase to say that we are to be a blessing to others because we’ve been so richly blessed. As that realization about Mindy hit me this morning, I realized I’d been looking at this phrase backwards. It seems to me that it is actually in being a blessing to others that we are most richly blessed. You can’t have the one without the other.

Blessed to be a blessing. May we look to those from whom we least expect a blessing, and in them find the richest blessing of all.