

September 2, 2007

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a

Luke 14:1, 7-14

When you're hosting a dinner party, don't invite friends, relatives or the rich neighbors.

Some of us might actually be relieved at this bit of advice from Jesus. More of us might be upset. However we react to the end of today's gospel, we should remember that it's what scholars call Semitic exaggeration, a way of making one's point in Jesus' time.

And the point seems to be that we shouldn't get so caught up with position and prestige that we forget the people who are not on the "A" list. A good message for our celebrity-obsessed culture.

Both the gospel and our first reading emphasize humility. Jesus refers to the customary organization of a banquet in his time, in order to urge his hearers to practice humility and thereby avoid humiliation. The author of the Book of Sirach advises us to approach everything with humility and strongly implies that the person who is humble is also very wise.

Humility is not a popular virtue these days. It's generally associated with being a loser, and nobody wants that. It's one of those things, along with "turning the other cheek" that leads us to take Jesus' teachings less seriously than we ought to, or to wonder just how practical our Lord was. He wouldn't have understood what life is like in the 21st century, we might say.

But humility is something we should want to have. It doesn't mean that we think we are worthless, that we have nothing to offer, that the world would be better without us. It does mean having an honest appreciation of the gifts God has given us – of knowing what our

strengths and weaknesses really are. It's being down to earth. It's having common sense. And true humility can lead to wisdom.

Because this is Labor Day weekend, it might be helpful to consider humility in the context of the working world, a world which seems to grow harsher by the day, in an apparent global race to the bottom.

If we are humble, we do recognize the gifts and talents that we possess, and we hope that we will be able to use them in our work. But we should also recognize that this is true of everyone, everywhere.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves why so many people cannot find decent work, why so many are suffering in absolute poverty, and why lots of folks with perfectly good jobs are so insecure. We should also reflect on just why we subscribe to the idea that some kinds of work are worth hundreds of times more in compensation than other kinds. Or why some workers are worthy of respect because of their job titles, while others are not. As Christians, we ought to respect everyone who does an honest day's work. This includes unpaid labor, which can be very valuable.

And, would any humble Christian refer to workers over a certain age as "corporate fat"? Or say that unemployed people are useless and should never be hired? Things like this are routinely said in our country, and statistically the majority of the people saying them have got to be Christians.

Conditions won't begin to get better in our working world until we start paying serious attention to Jesus' teachings, including those on humility. We respect ourselves – who we truly are. We respect each other in the same way. And we remember our Christian conviction that everything that is good comes from God.

I've always liked how Fr. Paul Bonacci responds to a compliment on his preaching or some other aspect of his ministry. He doesn't say, oh, it was nothing. He thanks the person and then gives credit to the

Lord. All of us, but especially those who are fortunate in terms of work and income, need to keep this in mind.

Now let's get back to that bit of Semitic exaggeration at the close of this morning's gospel. Jesus does want us to have special regard for people whom society considers to be without power or worth. Our list of who those people are is probably a bit different from his list, but Jesus' point is still valid.

The interesting thing about this is that Jesus advises the banquet host to invite people to his dinners who can't possibly reciprocate. In that way his act is wholly selfless. The concern about what's in it for me goes away.

Now what should this practice remind us of? That which we call grace. And who acts this way all the time? God! So what Jesus is really calling us to is our divinization, something Eastern Christians understand, but the West doesn't talk about too much. Becoming more like our God, being part of that assembly of the firstborn, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, and participating in the resurrection of the righteous. That is God's promise to people who are both humble and wise.

Amen.