

Jesus sure has a different way of looking at things, doesn't he?

Status matters to us, but it doesn't matter to Jesus or to God. And although our Gospel passage seems to be about a simple, mundane matter of who should be seated where and who should be on a guest list, we need to dig a little deeper to see that there is more going on than that.

Part of digging deeper is noticing the grammar used. In the parable, he lays out the story in the present tense and his conclusion is in the future tense. The same goes for the instructions on who should be on a guest list, the instructions are present tense and the result is in the future. Now you may be thinking, thanks for the grammar lesson Melinda, what's the point? The point is this: Jesus is describing our human reality and our human way of things in the present. When he speaks of the future, Jesus is speaking of the unfolding of God's Kingdom, of what God wants from us, and for us.

When we pay attention to status, when we expect reciprocity for an invitation, we are expecting a "quid pro quo" - if you give me this, I'll give you that. We expect that the exchange is more or less even. Jesus points out that when we invite the poor, the crippled, the lame or the blind they aren't in a position to take part in a quid pro quo; they can't repay the social

debt. So that puts us in a magnanimous position if we do as Jesus asks.¹

Well, why would we do as Jesus asks?

Because, you see, each and every one of us is the recipient of God's grace and mercy. We are like the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind because we cannot possibly pay back or give back in equal measure what God has done for us. Recall that God has given up his Son, and Jesus has willingly died, so that we can live. How do we repay that debt? Obviously, we can't.

With a gift like that, however, we can respond. And we can respond in that intersection that is our reality and the unfolding of God's Kingdom. Out of deep gratitude we seek to be as Jesus was. We seek to live as God would have us live. Out of profound joy and thanksgiving we assist in making God's Kingdom a present reality for all of us, not just some of us.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews has some very concrete suggestions as to how we might do that. The author describes his work as "a word of exhortation." (13:22) Some scholars suggest that the passage we heard this morning is the conclusion of a sermon. In any event, this so-called "letter" should be preached!

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working preacher: God's Quid Pro Quo," www.workingpreacher.org (for Year C Proper 17)

So, what practical advice is being offered as we stand in the spot grounded in human reality and convinced that God's reality as revealed in Jesus Christ is continually unfolding? First, we're told to love one another in the community of faith. After all, we're the ones who bolster each other up, cheer each other on, and look after one another when bad things happen.

This was essential advice to the first recipients of this letter, for they were a community that suffered for their faith. We have some sense that they may have been dispirited as they expected more suffering. Solidarity with one another was necessary. In the same way, travelers who were Christians need safe places to stay, something to eat, somewhere to lay their heads, and our writer is reminding the audience to offer strangers hospitality, just as Abraham and Sarah did by the oaks of Mamre when they were initially unaware that they were attending angels. As an aside, I'm willing to bet that those of us who have participated in the WARM program, assisted at Soup-er Sunday, bought groceries for Three Oaks' residents, worked in the Food Pantry or served someone in some other way, have had the sense that they were "entertaining angels."

Our writer is also reminding that first audience that many of them have been in prison and knew what it was like to depend on family members for food and emotional support. Please remember to visit those currently in prison. Show empathy and give aid. What the writer could be saying to us, in other words, is keep up all the ministries of the church, particularly those ministries that support who are powerless or without needed resources. We do this out not only out of love for God and our neighbor; we also do it because we can imagine what it must be like to worry about having enough to eat.²

Another bit of advice our writer gives is to be faithful within marriage. That first audience was living in a culture where marriage was not held in high regard and where having and raising children was not especially sought after. In fact, the Romans did not even have enough children to replace themselves. To be faithful in marriage, to put one's spouse's interests ahead of one's own was completely and utterly countercultural. Within marriage itself, lived within the Christian ideal, was to unfold God's Kingdom one household at a time.

² Adams, David R., "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 4*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2010, 17.

Now no one, Christian or otherwise, can follow any of this advice 100% of the time. It takes practice and it takes love. Much of the time, it simply takes *wanting to* do what God wants us to do that we come close to fulfilling God's wishes for us. The Holy Spirit does the rest.

This weekend, I think the Holy Spirit has been hard at work here at Ascension assisting those who want to provide food to the least of us. Also hard at work are Midshipmen engineering students, who have spent all day Saturday looking at our Undercroft and designing ways to meet our Food Pantry's storage needs. The demands on our Pantry continue to grow and our partners in ministry rise to the challenge, filling our shelves. The Spirit is helping us, I hope, make sure that no one has to be food insecure in the neighborhoods surrounding our church. We're actively taking care of our current ministry needs.

Does this trying get us a ticket to the best spots in heaven? Does it even get us close to the gates? Well, no. Our entry fee has already been paid by Jesus - remember, there's no quid pro quo here. We do these things because we believe that Jesus is worth imitating. We do this to please God. We do this as a reflection of God's great love for us. We do

this in gratitude. And we share with our neighbors out of the abundance of love that God has shown us.

AMEN.