

Proper.17C – September 1, 2019

My niece, Rebecca, tells stories about coming to visit my parents, her grandparents, for Christmas and Thanksgiving. The cherry dining table from her great-grandmother's home had always been laid before her family's arrival. My job was always to go under the table, to lash twine around the legs to keep the extra leaves in place. The dining room seemed small with the extra leaves of the table inserted. Access to one end of the table was blocked completely by a corner china cabinet, a majestic old piece with curved glass. Becky's place was in the corner, on her grandfather's left, next to that china cabinet. It was her place, because she was the oldest of the four grandchildren, most likely to understand the dire warnings about not knocking into the glass, which practically pressed into her side. The poor child spent many meals, it seems, terrified of breaking that glass. And immediately upon arrival, her grandmother told her, yet again, that the glass would be irreplaceable because of its curved shape. Becky thought she had been dealt the worst possible place, and I believe in many ways, she had. Her grandmother thought that it was a place of honor, because Becky had never broken the glass. She fulfilled all expectations: sitting practically immobile, even at a very early age. She was the trustworthy granddaughter!

This story exposes our carefully constructed ideas about place and honor. What Becky's grandmother thought was an honored place was a place of sheer torture for her. The china cabinet was a material object, without meaning. It was useless in the fabric of our family's common life. After all, family photographs don't feature the china cabinet! What was important was Becky, her safe arrival after a long car trip, her presence at the table, her uniqueness as a child of God. What mattered was that we were glad to see her, to remark on how she had grown, to fuss over her a little bit. If she had been absent, our family would have been missing someone important. What if that curved glass had shattered and the whole piece of furniture had to be sent to the dump? Becky's worthiness in the sight of God would not have even flickered.

This is one of the points Jesus makes in today's gospel. Getting stuck in a seat, one of honor, or one of less honor, is limiting. We seem to have a great need and desire to order what is around us, to deposit things and people in a particular place in our heads. We do it by any means: age, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, illness, and the scary thing is that we don't even think about it. But these are all human-made classifications. The brutal truth is, we make them up. Jesus is telling us that God is completely disinterested in the distinctions we make.

In keeping a customary place, we miss the chance to sit in any other. The table has a place for all of God's people, and when we continually sit with those that are just like us, we miss out. Our souls expand and grow when we are balanced by those who are different from us. The Eucharistic table is such a place. You come to the altar each Sunday in a somewhat different order (even though many are in the same pew as last week!). When you are mixed up, even slightly, there are no discernible places of honor. It doesn't matter if you are first at the rail, or in the middle, or if you are last. Yet in everyday life, it is not so easy.

We gather together with those who are like us, but the gospel tells us we are missing out. To insist on one place, even to claim it, is to make it impossible to know the richness of another's place.

A second point Jesus makes is about the appropriate *nature* of place, and that's a bit more complex. You remember what happened. Jesus performed a healing in the middle of the sabbath meal, at the home of a Pharisee, alongside other Pharisees. But we know that Jesus preferred to eat with an assortment of people from differing backgrounds and perceived social acceptability. Surely at this sabbath meal there were expectations of social conventions, table manners and certain standards of behavior. Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon has an amusing way of helping us understand what happened when Jesus decided to cure the man with dropsy in the middle of the sabbath meal:

In his words:

Imagine a modern house for this prosperous Pharisee - one with a dining room grand enough to hold a fourteen-foot table. Make the meal to which he invited Jesus a sit-down dinner for twelve . . . Jesus gets through the soup and the fish well enough, but just as the roast is brought in, he discovers that the gentleman next to him has a back problem.

Being not only kindhearted but good with his hands . . . he suddenly decides to help the man . . . "May I have your attention for just a minute, folks?" he says. "Old Waldo here has a real bad back. Hurts him worse than a toothache. So if it's okay with you all, I'm going to plop him down right here on the dinner table and do a little healing on him. Er, Mrs. Terwilliger, do you think you could move that roast down to the other end? . . . There! Up you go now, Waldo. And mind your feet so you don't get your shoelaces into the cauliflower."

Do you see? The crime of healing on the sabbath is no mere technical violation of the law. It is a crime against civility, against decency . . . - against, in short, the received wisdom about how life should be lived. It is proof that the person who commits it has lost all sense of conformity and manners and is therefore dangerously impervious to the glue that holds everybody else's life together. ^[1]

(End of quote.)

With customary humor, Fr. Capon exposes the so-called Sabbath infraction Jesus committed. It was a social one. But Jesus's mission is showing how much God loves us. So, to add insult to injury, Jesus moved on to offend his hosts still further by pointing out that their outrage at his behavior was completely inappropriate.

^[1] The Parables of Grace Robert Farrar Capon. Eerdmans 1988 p. 120

Because, Jesus sees this matter of seating order through the lens of his own steady movement toward Jerusalem and his certain death. He knows that his death will make a mockery of such social conventions, which were so important to the Pharisees, and to all of us, too.

He knows that the most humble place is the place where we have absolutely nothing, where we have only the bodies in which our souls are housed, where we cannot bring or take anything. And in fact, the only place that is reserved especially for us is the place of our own death, which is at the same time, that extraordinary place of faith by which we expect to be raised with Jesus the Christ. In that context, the “lowest” seat is the best seat at the table.

So, it seems that the most humble place of all is the place of having nothing except faith. “Give up the social conventions,” Jesus says. “Invite those who cannot repay you. Show some compassion and companionship. Break bread together.”

That’s the core of the second point about this parable: that it is about humility, and about relationship. The relationship is to be modeled on that which is between ourselves and God, not the relationships we have created between our human selves. What binds us together is our kinship to God, and then thereafter, in like manner, with one another.

This need to order ourselves is undoubtedly human, but not godly. The need to perceive the richness in our diversity is not so easily human, but is certainly godly. The reality of both is learned over and over, day by day, and hour by hour, by God’s mercy and grace.

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”