

Yr. C, Proper 17
September 2, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1868 words

Lessons:
Psalm 112
Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18
Hebrews 13:1-8
Luke 14:1, 7-14

“Go and sit down at the lowest place. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”¹

I speak to you in the name of Christ, who “humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”²

“The doctor’s waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence...Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation. There was one vacant chair and a place on the sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty blue romper who should have been told to move over and make room for the lady. He was five or six, but Mrs. Turpin saw at once that no one was going to tell him to move over. He was slumped down in the seat, his arms idle at his sides and his eyes idle in his head; his nose ran unchecked...Mrs. Turpin remained standing.”³

Thus begins the most powerful sermon ever written about these lessons. Some of you already recognize it as the work of that great female Roman Catholic preacher of the 20th century named Flannery O’Conner, in her short story entitled, “Revelation.” It is an indictment of arrogance, and a most eloquent expression of our blindness and God’s graciousness in spite of it all.

St. Martin’s is suburban enough and polite enough that we don’t need instruction about taking the “lowest place.” We generally show hospitality to our guests: we don’t step in front of visitors to take the last cup of lemonade on the patio, there is always one deviled egg that gets returned to the kitchen at parish dinners because we’ve been taught not to take the last one of anything.

These are good and important things—after all, it is easier to show hospitality to strangers if we practice decent etiquette. But the real point of today’s Gospel lesson, just like the real point of O’Conner’s short story—is NOT about etiquette. It is about the Kingdom of God.

Those of you who have taken Education for Ministry (offered here on Sunday nights!) will recall some of the principal dynamics of Jesus’ society that are different from our own. One of the principal dynamics of Jesus’ cultural experience was that it operated on the basis of “patronage.” It was the duty of the rich and powerful to be benefactors of the poor and weak. Likewise, the beneficiaries were to feel a proper sense of obligation to their benefactors.

Jesus’ society was also guided by a general disposition to pursue honor and avoid shame. (In our society, of course, we pursue *wealth and attention*, often in the most shame-less ways imaginable!)

You can hear these societal dynamics echoing in today’s lessons: The writer of Ecclesiasticus admonishes his audience against arrogance. The writer to the Hebrews reminds his audience to maintain their obligation to patronage by “not failing to show hospitality to strangers, and by living free of the love of

¹ Luke 14:10-11

² Ephesians 2:8

³ Flannery O’Conner, “Revelation” in *The Complete Stories*, (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 488.

money.” And Luke describes Jesus calling upon his listeners to consider the honor:shame dynamic not just in cultural terms, but in terms of God’s Kingdom—which always surprises and challenges us as a right-side-up reality in an upside-down world.

Let me give you an illustration of our upside-down reality that is so recognizable, so intuitive, and so common that we have even turned it into a game that we all know.

Who among us does not remember being the odd person out in a game of musical chairs when the music stopped and we were the only one left standing? It is a game that reminds us of our upside-down world in which there is not enough—in this case, chairs—to go around. As time goes by there is even less to go around so the scrambling becomes even more intense.

Musical Chairs is the perfect metaphor for the kingdoms of earth, and especially those whose engines run on capitalism. The message is simple: Resources are scarce. Grab what might be yours before someone else does. Otherwise, they will be “in” and you will be “out” when the music stops.

We are so steeped in this upside-down earthly kingdom reality that we don’t even realize it. Most of us have long since checked off our obedience to Jesus’ teaching because of our good etiquette that we fail to see how we have tried to insure ourselves against the unpredictable nature of grace.

Let me reveal one way we play—and win—at musical chairs as adults, how we play—and win—in the earthly kingdom as adults. Since it is now football season, I will begin with the obvious: Silver Spur and IPTAY. Wait a minute, you say, I am not in the luxury skybox seats, I’m not even near the 50 yr. line. There may be places of honor, but I’m closer to what Jesus calls the “lowest place” which in a college football stadium turns out to be the “highest place.” I’m not picking on sports fans. What about those of us who have attended a play or a concert recently? What about airplane or hotel reservations? What about our grandparents and great grandparents who paid pew rents in order to reserve a specific seat inside the Church?

I’m not chastising you for reserving seats (I just spent this past week reserving seats and tickets for our youth trip to Atlanta.) Seat reservations are a sensible, orderly—and even necessary—way of managing events and transportation. What I want to do is tease your awareness about the subtle ways that we seek to control our place at the table, even if we aren’t exactly jockeying for the very ‘highest’ place of honor. We want some certainty that things will turn out o.k.—maybe not great, but at least o.k. The bottom line is this: when the music stops, we’re in a seat.

Yet, by turning the “seats at the table” into commodities we can buy and sell, we have severed the bond we have with our patron. We are protected from being moved to the top row of the upper deck because we paid the price for better seats. Likewise, we don’t tend fantasies of the Athletics Director showing up alongside us at the Star Spangled Banner to invite us up to better seats in the sky box.

It’s clean and simple: the patron doesn’t owe us any more than what we have paid for. And we don’t owe the patron any thankfulness for what we have bought with our own money. In other words, we have controlled our place at the table and therefore we have made certain that things will turn out o.k.—maybe not great, but at least o.k. When the music stops, we’re in a seat.

In addition to severing the bond between patron and client, our systems also remove matters of honor and shame from the equation. Since we have adopted the conventional wisdom that “you get what you pay for.” We generally don’t view the people in the orchestra section as being more honorable. They just paid more money. Likewise, the poor college students stuck far up underneath the balcony on the outside

corner of the auditorium are not less honorable, they are just living on a shoestring budget. It is not a matter of honor or shame. We are sitting where we belong—it may not be great, but it is at least o.k. And—when the music stops, we’re in a seat.

Well, in Jesus’ parable, the athletics director *does* show up and escorts those who can’t afford it (and therefore, don’t deserve it) right next to him in the sky box. There’s champagne and caviar. The hospitality is indescribable!

In Jesus’ parable, the orchestra director invites the tone deaf and those who wouldn’t know Brahms from Bo Diddley back stage after the concert and treats them as if they belonged in the seat of the first violinist. Their humility—and even their shame at being so ignorant and unworthy—is overwhelmed by indescribable hospitality!

You see, in the right-side-up reality of the Kingdom of God nobody deserves to be at the banquet, period. But by God’s grace, everyone is invited anyway. One of the symbolic ways the early Church illustrated this was by inviting people to come inside the basilica, unlike the custom of pagan worshippers to remain outside the temples of gods like Apollo and Zeus. And in our Eucharistically-centered worship, we don’t just come in take a seat near the back. We come forward and receive the gifts of God right up here around the altar. Christ is our host and although we don’t *control* his presence, we do receive it—by God’s grace. When the music stops, it is not about having a seat. It is about having a life-giving bond with our patron, who is God in Christ.

Moreover, in the right-side-up reality of the Kingdom of God, our honor and even our shame are overwhelmed by God’s righteousness, which we recognize most clearly as mercy.

Near the end of Flannery O’Conner’s short story, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of a “vaste horde of souls rumbling toward heaven. There were... battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”⁴

The Kingdom of God is like the mother-of-all-banquets. By all counts it should be the rarest and most difficult of tickets to find anywhere, and yet the invitations are showing up all around and all the time, especially among the unlikeliest of people. These tickets are literally priceless—i.e. without price—you *cannot* buy one.

Yes, the Kingdom of God is like the mother-of-all-banquets. By all counts it should be sensible and orderly, and yet there is not a single reserved seat in the house (just ask the mother of James and John, sons of Zebedee). You see, there are no places of honor, save one. And this place—at the very center—is reserved for the ultimate patron, the ultimate source of honor and goodness, and the ultimate bond and inspiration of life and communion. Who else *needs* honor and respectability in a place like that?

You see, we’re talking about the Kingdom of God, where we cannot—and need not—control our own place. We’re talking about the Kingdom of God, where things turn out much better than “o.k.” And when the music stops—this is the Kingdom of God—the music *never* stops.

⁴ Flannery O’Conner, “Revelation” in *The Complete Stories*, (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 508.