

## "LEARNING FROM JESUS HOW TO THROW A PARTY"

TEXT: "But when you give a feast, invite the poor,  
the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will  
be blessed, because they cannot repay you".  
(Luke 14: 13)

INTRODUCTION Normally we wouldn't think of turning to Jesus for advice on how to throw a party. How to pray - yes. How to fix a broken heart - yes. How to look at death - yes. But Jesus and parties do not easily come together in our minds. We associate Jesus with Good News, but not necessarily with good times.

The problem is ours - not His. If we could free ourselves long enough from Sunday School art and other ascetic caricatures of Jesus, we would find that He was very much a "party" man. He performed His first miracle at a party. It was at a dinner occasion that He allowed a woman to anoint His feet and dry them with her hair. He was even accused by His enemies of being a "wine-bibber and a glutton". And He likened the Kingdom of heaven to a festive banquet.

The third Gospel is our best guide to the social life of Jesus. It's been accurately observed that St. Matthew shows us all the mountain tops, and St. Luke takes us to one dinner party after another. It was probably at one such party that Jesus spoke the words that provide us with today's text:

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kindred, or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

SHARED AND SPECIAL MEALS Shared meals are important events in the lives of civilized men and women. Much of what we are shows up at the dining table - what we eat, how we eat it, the spirit in which we receive our food, the friends we ask or do not ask to join us, the conversations into which we enter, the mood we help to create.

An ill temper and a good meal are virtually incompatible. Even the ancients understood this. Back in Proverbs we find it written, "Better is a dinner with herbs where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it". One of the best and surest ways to encourage an ulcer is to bolt down your food while the acids of anger churn away inside.

But Jesus in today's text is not speaking about meals in general. He is talking here about special meals - social occasions, banquets, feasts, dinner parties. He recognized the need for such occasions; He did not criticize them per se. The need to unwind and to socialize are vital to our health.

I have an undertaker friend who every once in a while just has to get on a plane and head south to Florida. Recently he showed me some pictures of himself in Florida. I'm so used to seeing him in a somber suit and conservative tie moving quietly about his establishment speaking soothing words of comfort that the pictures he showed me of himself jarred me at first. There he was - flamboyantly

attired. No black suit. Bright shirt and bermuda shorts. The ticket sellers at the race track recognized him; they knew who he was. He has the need to loosen up and let go. We all have it.

And we should not lose sight of the fact that Jesus was not beyond enjoying himself in the company of others. It's precisely when the world is most forlorn and harried that such occasions are more necessary than ever. Yet, many Christians have a hard time enjoying God's good gifts of life. "Man's chief end" say the Presbyterians, "is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever". It's not that apparent that we enjoy each other, much less God, very often.'

BACK TO JESUS AND PARTIES But back to Jesus and His advice in regard to throwing parties. I guess you could say His main concern was with the invitation list. Hear Him again,

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid". (RES' I PROS' I TI)

Jesus was well aware of our tendency to invite only those who can do us good in one way or another. We can safely call this "calculated reciprocity".

It reminds me of the printed message on a place-mat in a restaurant where I occasionally stop to have a meal.

"To get you must give" it reads. "Invite that client here for lunch or dinner; show him hospitality and he'll show you an order. Create a friend, and he'll create business for you".

That's a rather bleak way to do any kind of business, let alone the business of the heart. This "calculated reciprocity" produces boredom and even resentment in our social life. A conservative commentator suggests that there was a touch of sarcasm in the words of Jesus. He renders them:

"If you invite those who can help you, you'd better look out because they'll invite you back, and then how upset you'll be".

Perhaps this helps us to understand that old proverb from Albania: "Every guest hates the other, and the host hates them all".

A BETTER WAY So Jesus here is urging upon the world a better way. He suggests that we mix it up. Specifically, He said to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. He doesn't mean that we should never arrange for dinners with friends and family and favorite neighbors. And please, don't go home today saying that the preacher down at the church told us we don't have to have Aunt Mimmie and Uncle Chester over for dinner ever again. You may be hearing that, but that's not what I'm saying. The point is that such occasions will happen naturally - filial ties and human nature being what they are. But this other kind of feast will not occur to you unless it is urged upon you by the Lord of the Kingdom.

Mix it up. You see Jesus here is challenging the principle - so dominant in our social life that "like is better off with like". ~~He's challenging it.~~ We

do some mixing up to be sure. Every good host and hostess sits down in advance to figure out the pairings. We're liberal enough these days to want to be sure to have some blacks and whites together. And we certainly don't want a party where everyone is introverted or extroverted. Mix it up - the rich and the poor, the young and the old (and a few in between), black and white (and those in between), the maimed, the lame. You get the idea. To me, those are the parties to remember - ~~not where everyone is a carbon copy of the next person.~~

HANDICAPPED AND POOR Jesus is telling us to invite the handicapped. Why is it that so many of us tend to feel uncomfortable around handicapped people? Is it guilt? Is it fear? What is it. In our society we practice unconsciously avoiding the handicapped.

Maybe Jesus has something here for us. God generally gives the handicapped of body some amazing compensations of spirit. I think of the handicapped people I know. Some of them are truly amazing people. Often they wind up doing more for us than we could ever do for them. Think about it.

Jesus is telling us to invite the poor. He's talking about the economically deprived. He's talking in our terms - about people who are on welfare, or who perhaps aren't capable of qualifying for welfare because of the maze of rules and regulations that are there.

Stay with this a bit longer. We should call this teaching for what it is, and acknowledge that the hardest kind of integration to achieve in our society is economic integration. The lamentable saga of the Forest Hills housing project is an illustration of the point. Middle income blacks have no trouble sharing a housing complex with middle income whites, and high income blacks can live peaceably with high income whites. What produced hostility out at Forest Hills, as I recall, was the fact that the "poor" were to live with "not poor". It's tough. Indeed, there aren't many church I know of where the poor and the rich can sing the Doxology in harmony together.

Let's be honest with ourselves. Some are probably saying to themselves, but who wants the "poor" at a dinner party. Can you imagine the tempest that would be generated? The poor person starts to talk about qualifying for welfare while across the table somebody else wants to talk about his tax loopholes and his oil depletion allowance. But Jesus is saying, "yes....that's the very kind of party you ought to have!"

To be sure of my suspicions I took Amy Vanderbilt down from my book shelf and reviewed what she had to say about the invitation list. She wrote,

"The successful hostess never includes many new or difficult guests at what should be an intimate little dinner. Eight people who never saw or heard of each other before - and hope never to see or hear of each other again - can do social violence to the most adequately planned evening".

This authority, in other words, is advising us to play it safe. She even goes so far as to tell us how to handle the situation when a difficult guest slips through our filtering net.

"When it does happen that a hostess finds she has erred in asking someone highly and unamusingly contentious to a party, she and the host must spend the evening trying to keep the

conversation away from explosive topics - explosive to that particular guest. If he gets under way, and others grow angry or hurt, the host or hostess breaks in with 'perhaps we'd better continue thos some other time', and then attempts a diverting technique. Best of all is to give the arguer something to do. If you have a game room get someone to take him on at table tennis".

Well, Jesus was saying that we ought to include that kind at our social gatherings, that it makes for a good party - a party to remember instead of one you'd perhaps rather forget.

WHY DOES HE PROD US Why do you suppose He prods us gently in this direction? Clearly, it could do the poor some good. They would get the lift of a decent meal and experience a renewal of self-respect. It might even help them to see that they're not the only ones who have problems.

But, I think, more than that...it would likely do the host and hostess even greater good. You see by the time people are financially able to throw a party in this city they have usually lost touch with the poor. Only in distant memory can they recall direct associations with the poor. This is so true that most of us would have difficulty knowing where to find any poor to invite to a meal. We might have started that way ourself, but we've come a long way since.

This is part of what is tearing our society apart. The rich are becoming richer, the poor poorer. We have stereotypes of each other and seldom sit at table to share a common meal. Most of our charitable giving is done through agencies which act as buffers between ourselves and the needy. With the poor at our table, we would come to understand our possessions differently. I think we might begin to see how blind are the defenses that we raise to justify our privileges....our extravagances.

AND THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND IT And the principle behind Jesus' teaching is this: the less likely your chances of being repaid, the more likely God will be pleased. Such hospitality as He urged upon us must be seen as its own reward. He wants us to abandon our cold and often calculated ways with others so that we may discover the pure pleasure of doing a kindness not to be returned.

I suspect that Jesus had something more than meals in mind. It is life styles that He was bent on changing. And ~~He would have us concentrate our gifts and attention on those beneath us, humanly speaking, rather than on those on the same level or above us. This is where we're apt to fall short; we do not do it. We curry the favors of our peers, our superiors and withhold our substance and ourselves from those whom we take to be blow us.~~ Our social priorities, according to Jesus, would need to be radically revised in many instances.

HOLIDAY SEASON "Learning From Jesus How To Throw A Party". I chose this theme purposely today because we stand at the headwaters of a big holiday season. And before long, we'll be uptight, like human computers, figuring out who sent us cards last year and who didn't, and we'll make our instant calculations and rather mechanically make sure that we don't offend a peer or a superior or someone who can do us good. Christmas giving for many is not a giving, but rather an exchanging of gifts. And calculated exchanges are alien to the true spirit of Bethlehem.

CONCLUSION

Jesus would prod us then to mix it up a bit this year.

Try giving "down" instead of up...with your gifts and cards. Bless some people in the coming weeks with "kingdom kind" of giving and of sharing. Remember that the Kingdom of heaven is like a great feast - a banquet to which any and all may come. Not a one of us has a claim on the host. Every man and woman is welcome.

All things are ready. Come! Still there is room. Come! The poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. All have as much right to sup with me as I have to sup with Christ.

Mix it up and see what happens. We may not feel comfortable with this, and some may not like it at all. But remember, friend, this too is the Gospel. And, said Jesus, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".

PRAYER

Lord, help us to break with those social styles and rigid patterns that so often seem to run counter to the nature of thy kingdom. And let thy hospitality toward us be the measure of our hospitality toward others. So shall we discover that we are never happier than when we give, expecting nothing in return. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen