

Homily on Luke 14:12-14

November 6, 2017

Intro: One of my earliest memories is of my parents discussing whom they should invite to a dinner. “We have to invite the Glerups, because they had us to dinner last month.” “We have to invite the Steeles because they were so nice when John hit a baseball through their window.” In short, when we invite others to dinner at our homes we invite friends or those who have done us a favor.

The situation was no different in Jesus’ own day. Scholars call their social norms balanced reciprocity. If someone did you a favor, you owed him a similar one. If you initiated the relationship by doing someone a favor, then he owed you a similar one to reciprocate. That balanced reciprocity is what is in play in today’s gospel.

Luke: Today’s gospel is the last of three lessons on the etiquette of meals in Luke 14. Jesus turns to his host and advises him of the conduct of one hosting a banquet. He is not to invite his friends or relatives or wealthy neighbors, on the hope that they will return the favor (in balanced reciprocity). If they do so, then the host will only be repaid, back to square one. Rather, he should invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, who cannot afford to return the favor. Then his repayment will be by God in the resurrected life of the final Kingdom of God.

The Meaning for Luke’s readers is clear. In his gospel Jesus has the givers of banquets going out into the streets to invite in the poor, the lame, the alienated. Luke’s community is a mixture of a few wealthy patrons and a large number of poor Christians. Luke wants his wealthy Christians to know that Jesus is asking them to care for the poor in their midst, and to do so in such a way that God will be their reward. It is a counter-cultural message for his time.

The meaning is just as counter-cultural for us. The thought of inviting outsiders off the streets into our homes is frightening. The crowds on the streets are not as submissive, not as acceptable as were Jesus’ crowds. They might steal our silver, or other valuables. They might destroy our furniture, or even respond with violence. We are filled with all kinds of forebodings. How are we to put Jesus’ commands into practice in today’s day and age?

We should begin with small steps. Each of us knows of a relative, or a neighbor, or a friend who has fallen on hard times. These people are not a threat to us. And they are not likely to have the resources to repay us. But they are in need of a welcoming hand and heart. They need to know that, in spite of their reversals, they are still worthwhile, are still loved. When we invite them in, we know that we are doing what God wants and that God will reward us.

Then, perhaps, we can move to inviting those whom we do not know---a poor man who is a total stranger. When we do so, it is not as an act of duty, or an act of disinterested charity. We invite a person who has an intrinsic value as a child of God. We invite with eagerness, for these men have experiences and values which open our minds and hearts to new realities. As Hebrews 13:2 tells us, “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” More to the point: the one we invite is Jesus himself, “Whatever you do to the least of my brothers that you do unto me.” The reward we get is not some paltry meal from a friend; it is the gift of God’s own self. And so the reward of our generous hospitality is not just in heaven; it is now. Good news.