

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Labor Day

How many people have attended a banquet? Nowadays, there is a banquet for just about everything; little league, the Elk, the Rotary Club, weddings. Usually, there's far too much food than any of us can or should eat; appetizers, salad, soup, main course, bread and dessert. Each course in itself could be an entire meal. We load up our plates and reload them and perhaps even return for thirds. I know when my daughter got married, we had three days of celebration. Because so many people came from out of town, we had a rehearsal picnic in our backyard, the wedding the next day, and breakfast the third day, again, in our yard. I think I went to bed by 5PM, I was so tired.

In the time of Jesus, banquets were very special and very rare. People just did not have the disposable food source that we are so fortunate to have. Village weddings were a huge deal; both for those who threw the party and those who attended. It was a special day for everyone.

Those who lived in larger communities like Capernum, probably had citizens of note, small note, but note nevertheless like Simon or Zaccheus who might have thrown parties for their friends. For a laborer to be invited to a dinner in these homes would have been a very great honor, indeed. Novels written in the nineteenth century give you an idea of the turmoil an ordinary person might go through as he/she contemplated a dinner with his/her betters. If you are a "Downton Abbey" person, you might understand as well. There simply was no sense of equality of people before God that we believe in, even though the parties involved went to church and read scripture. Somehow, it didn't apply to them. It was just the way the world was, gospel or not.

We don't know if Jesus went through this kind of turmoil when he was invited to dinner at Simon's house or when he showed up at the house of Zaccheus because it seems as if he never saw the boundaries that others saw, the clear lines of demarcation that separated those who had and those who didn't. I rather think that he would not be wowed by his betters, given the very clear directive of God to love one's neighbor as oneself.

On the other hand, we don't know if Jesus lived a life of hunger like many of his fellow Jews, but there is a distinct chance that he did. Consequently, an invitation to a banquet would be a very welcome thing, indeed, even for Jesus, even if he wasn't cowed by eating with his "betters." I guess that's why he used the metaphor of the banquet so many times in his parables.

The history of the civilization is essentially the history of the availability of food. You read about it in the bible. "A great famine struck the country of whatever." Bad weather, insects, war, disease could ruin an entire country in one year. We know what happened to Ireland during the great famine. In the American west, in Mexico, and South America, great peoples simply walked away from settlements and great cities when something terrible happened with their food supplies.

Most of us modern people in first world countries simply have no clue about food. In fact, obesity rather than starvation has become our problem.

And yet, hunger still stalks our country in ways that we cannot imagine. We all read stories of waste and think that waste is the norm. From my experience in the schools, I'd say that consumption is the norm because for significant numbers of our students, the school breakfast and lunch is the only food they will eat on any given day. Most of them don't waste it. They eat every crumb.

One of the saddest things that I have ever seen in the supermarkets is the current practice of locking up infant formula. The T-bone steaks and the spare ribs are right there in plain view and within reach, but the formula? It's locked up behind a counter. When my kids were little, you could purchase formula right off the shelves. Now, the cost of formula, even the powdered type, is so expensive, that it has to be locked up. Every time I see locked up formula, I think of hungry babies, crying because we as a society have chosen to have income restrictions about feeding little babies. Personally, I'd rather people steal formula than see even one baby without food. It breaks my heart to even think about it.

Jesus would not have liked this particular aspect of our world any more than he liked all of the artificial boundaries in his own world, boundaries based upon who

sits at the head of the table and gets the choice pieces, and those who sit at the bottom and get the crumbs.

People didn't like Jesus for lots of reasons. One of them was that he refused to recognize human-made boundaries which are so important to so many people. He believed that the world and everything in it was created by God and belonged to God. People didn't like his extravagant belief that all people deserved to be fed. People didn't like the fact that he taught that all people were children of that God. The powers looked upon his generosity and extravagance as squandering resources upon those who did not deserve it.

But Jesus never looked at it that way, which is why this story is included in scripture. Author Cynthia Bourgeault calls stories like this "spiritual hand grenades." The orderly and rational side of us asks, "Why should we feel obliged to feed the babies of a welfare mother? Doesn't she get enough money already? Lock up that formula! Why should we waste resources on people who don't appreciate it?" The side of us that follows Christ acknowledges the fact that Jesus never asked these questions and just gave and gave and gave until in the end, it cost him his life.

Some of you know that I like to garden. I'm not as good as Kate who is an expert. I'm an experimenter and I do things when I have time, not when the garden might actually need some help.

One thing I did learn is the value of the hosta plant. I have a monsta hosta in my front yard. Over the course of the last ten years, I have taken substantial parts of it and transplanted it to other areas in my yard. The hosta is never diminished by my lopping off a half or a third or a fourth of it on any given year. It grows to its same monstrous size each and every year. Not only that, the transplants grow to the same size as well.

The same thing happens with pachysandra and periwinkles. You can rip out some of the plants, put them somewhere else, and they begin to propagate like mad. Sharing does not diminish them. If anything, sharing increases the number of

hosta and pachysandra and periwinkles in my garden. No part of my garden or any part of the plants suffer any harm from the yearly sharing.

The Sufi mystic Rumi tries to explain this relentless generosity.

“Love is reckless, not reason. Reason seeks a profit. Love comes on strong, consuming herself, unabashed. Yet in the midst of suffering, love proceeds like a millstone, hard-surfaced and straight forward. Having died to self-interest, she risks everything and asks for nothing. Love gambles away every gift God bestows.”

Sometimes I think that this is what Jesus meant when he said to give all one's belongings to the poor in order to follow him. Jesus had a home, he had clothes. He was hardly an ascetic b/c he accepted invitations to dinner. But Jesus was never attached to anything material or ideologically. The only thing that motivated him was the love of God. In light of this love, all things could be disposed of, even his life.

And so, I'll leave you with a final question. Is it possible to live on the planet with generosity, with fearlessness, and with beauty that mirrors the love that God gives to us, pressed down and overflowing into our laps every single day of our lives with no strings and no test attached?