

(please refer to Luke 14:1-14 as a backdrop for the following homily)

Have you heard the story about a man who was invited to many large banquets and comments that he is obviously favored by the host because he is invariably seated near the bathroom. This usually brings a laugh from his table companions. As his wife points out, laughing will only encourage him. It does, and he presents a mock economic analysis that argues waterfront property is always the most valuable.

The story reminds me of an experience I have had when attending wedding receptions. It seems that protocol at many weddings calls for the priest to sit at the main table with the bride and groom and their wedding party. Just picture it: the bride at the elevated stage next to her groom: all the ladies in the wedding party to her left and all the men in the wedding party to the groom's right with the priest at the end of the line of men.

That arrangement looks pretty in the wedding pictures, but just think of the guy who gets stuck sitting next to the priest. He probably has never talked with a priest and never had any desire to. He may have some very good wedding night jokes to share ... but not with a priest present. And so he clumsily tries to be polite until, at the first possible moment at the end of the meal, he disappears from his seat.and so does the priest!

Today's gospel gives us 3 lessons in kingdom etiquette; Jesus is invited to a meal at the home of a leading Pharisee. When he gets there He sees a man who has the disease of dropsy is at the dinner. It is the Sabbath day. Jesus quickly realizes that the whole night will be a time of testing. He knows that he is being trapped into breaking the law of the Sabbath in order to heal, but nevertheless he quickly heals the man and sends him on his way. Then he goes on attack and challenges those present by asking them, "If you have a son or an ox which falls into a pit on the Sabbath, would they not save it?" They give no answer. Jesus' first lesson is clear; show compassion to those in need.

Now Jesus takes the offensive. He knows that dinners like the one he was about to attend were given to impress and enlist favors. The seating at each meal had its own pecking order. So he says, "If you go to a banquet, don't take the higher seat in case your host says it is reserved for someone else and embarrasses you by sending you to a lower seat. Take the lower seat and then your host can invite you to a higher place. Ah! Here is another lesson in gospel etiquette!

Again, the people at the Pharisees' table say nothing in response. They are trapped. If they say, "Hey, taking the lower seat is a great way to get ahead", they have blown their motive for attending such meals as a way of social climbing.

But if they come to a meal and take the lowest place and the host does NOT invite them up, they stand the chance of being humiliated.

Something else may happen if the host does NOT invite the guest up from the back seat they so strategically took. They may find out that persons who sit far back at a party are much more free to have a great time and not want to be caught in social climbing.

In fact, I am quite convinced that the person who sits near the bathroom at most weddings have a MUCH better time than those who are the honored guests up front. Remember, Jesus has said, “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly!” Sitting at the front is not always as much fun as it seems. The Pharisees simply don’t get it; they never get it; they are just trapped in the conventions of life and are not free to be converted to the fullness of life.

We are often like the Pharisees. We only relate and invite

- those who can benefit us,**
- those who can do us a favor,**
- those advance our cause.**

Here Jesus gives us a third lesson in gospel etiquette. When you throw a party, Do not invite your relatives and friends who can repay you. Rather invite the blind and the lame and the broken, who cannot repay you.

I was so surprised at what happened at our parish picnic last Sunday to see how well some of the women of our community had learned this third gospel lesson. Parishioners invited many guests who included family members and friends. Among the guests was staff from Robbie's House.

As you may have heard, we are leasing the IHM Convent to a group called Robbie's House which will be a home for up to twelve young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty two. They have aged out of the foster care system and still need to build their personal, social, academic and job related skills before going out on their own(explain. The staff hopes to be taking in young women by September.

Some of our women approached the director at the picnic and asked if they could be mentors for the young women. The director was overwhelmed with their generosity. It seemed to me that the women of our community were living out Jesus' mandate to invite those to the table who may not be able to give us something, but whose struggles in life may reveal the very face of Christ to us.

I wonder how Jesus' words about caring for those who cannot repay you be applied to the United States' foreign relations policy with other countries. Most often our decisions are based simply upon military might and national self interest. Yet, in the long run, helping countries like Haiti and Pakistan recover from their natural disasters

may do as much secure and lasting peace in the world than all the military might we send to Iraq.

Jesus is not finished yet. In fact, he is NEVER finished inviting the Pharisees ...or us.... to full life He continually reminds us, “When you throw a party, don’ t simply invite your rich relatives and friends so that they can repay you in the future. No, invite the blind and the lame and the deaf, maybe the teen down the street or the elderly woman next door or the young orphan in Kenya... And even maybe that man in the gospel who had dropsy.

Yes, three lessons in Gospel etiquette:

- 1. be compassionate**
- 2. Take the lower place**
- 3. And invite everyone, not just those who can return the favor.**

And remember, the people who have most fun at a party are not usually sitting at main table. The ones often having the best time are those sitting near the bathroom and praising God for placing them in the high rent district. Jesus’ mission is clear: I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly. Kingdom etiquette is radically different from our every day experience. It calls us to inner conversion. But His way of living will also bring fullness of life.

A number of ideas for this homily came from The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C by John Shea