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Table Talk and Etiquette in Luke's World

Biblical Reflection for 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, AUG. 24, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Jesus' most important teaching moments in Luke's Gospel take place at meals, parties, and celebrations, and we learn that each meal has a far greater significance than simply eating and drinking with others.

Today's table talk takes place in the context of the journey up to Jerusalem begun at 9:51. Nothing can be more serious for Luke than a dining table. Both the Eucharist and the revelations of the Risen Christ occur there (24:28-32). It was while eating together that Christ gave his disciples the promise of the Holy Spirit and their commission (Acts 1:8), and it was by table fellowship that Jews and Gentiles were able to be the Church (Acts 10:9-16; 11:1-18).

Table fellowship laden with meaning

Today's banquet scene found only in Luke (14:1; 7-14), provides the opportunity for Jesus' teachings on humility and presents a setting to display Luke's interest in Jesus' attitude toward the rich and the poor. For Judaism, for Jesus and for the early church, table fellowship was laden with very important religious, social and economic meanings.

Chapter 14:1 sets the stage for Verses 7-11. Jesus is at dinner in the home of a Pharisee and, while there, observes the social behavior of both guests and their host. Jesus' attention to and observation of everyday activity provided him not only insights into the true character of his listeners, but also opportunities to reveal the way life is in the Kingdom of God. The frequent and familiar are not to be overlooked in defining life in God's presence.

God exalts, not humans

What is the central point of today's Gospel story? Our human egos are quite clever, and upon hearing that taking a low seat may not only avoid embarrassment but lead to elevation to the head table, may convert the instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-exaltation. Taking the low seat because one is humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up is another! This entire message can also be ridiculous if there is a mad dash for the lowest place, with ears cocked toward the host, waiting for the call to ascend.

Those who lift themselves up over others will be brought down; those who regard themselves as among the "lowly" -- as human as anyone else -- will be raised up. Raising up and exaltation belong to God; recognition of one's lowliness is the proper stance for human beings. The act of humbling oneself is not something for its own sake, but for the sake either of God or of Christ.

Today's first reading from the book of Sirach (3:17-18, 20, 28-29) speaks about authentic humility that gives a

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true estimate of self (7-19). Through it a man performs duty, avoids what is beyond his understanding and strength (20-22). Pride, however, begets false greatness, misjudgment, stubbornness, sorrow, affliction and perdition (3:23-27).

The only real security

The rich, the powerful, and the 'just' find it very difficult to be humbly open to God; they are full of confidence in their own treasures and securities. The only real security is the one based on friendship with God and service of God: to be a servant of human beings and of God after the example of Jesus of Nazareth. Exalting oneself is a form of self-reliance as opposed to reliance on God. This makes clear why being rich, prosperous, satisfied almost naturally imply being arrogant, proud, godless.

The second lesson of today's Gospel goes against the accepted, normal practice of inviting only those who can be expected to return the favor in one form or another. Jesus reverses this norm: Do not invite to share a meal with you those who will some day reciprocate and even outdo you; instead, invite those who are never invited out -- the poor, those who live on the fringes of society, and those from whom no favors can be expected.

Etiquette "chez" Luke

Being a host carries with it many pleasant and positive connotations: friendliness, generosity, graciousness and concern for the comfort of others. However Jesus also observes (Luke 14:12-14) that hosting can be distorted and terribly misused when the host does his/her work with strings attached! A host who expects a return on his or her behavior will not offer service or food to those who cannot repay, and so guest lists consist only of persons who are able to return the favor.

Jesus calls for "kingdom behavior": inviting those with neither property nor place in society. God is our ultimate host, and we, as hosts are really behaving as guests, making no claims, setting no conditions, expecting no return. Luke's fourfold list of the poor, the maimed, the lame and blind (13) is no surprise to the reader. We knew about these people since Mary sang about them in her Magnificat at the beginning of this Gospel (Luke 1:46-55) and Jesus addressed them in his inaugural sermon in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-30).

Jesus impropriety and lax mercy

As with so many things he did, Jesus' befriending such types of people and eating with them angered his opponents. They murmured against him: "He has gone in to be a guest of a man who is a sinner," or "Look at him who eats with tax-collectors and prostitutes!" But where others saw only sinners, people on the fringe, public pariahs to be hated and isolated, Jesus saw something else. He saw human beings, perhaps people trapped in their own failure, desperately trying to be something better, awkwardly trying to make amends for a life of injustice. Jesus of Nazareth would exclaim: "Today salvation has come to this house, since this man also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

To seek and save the lost, to exalt the poor and the lowly, to humble the rich, godless, haughty and arrogant, this was Jesus' ministry. His opponents took offense at all this impropriety and lax mercy. All of those who Jesus recommends to be on our invitation lists are those who will receive the places of honor in the banquet of the kingdom: the poor, those who are maimed, lame, blind, gentiles, those who cannot repay us, who because of their status had not been allowed entrance into the center of the old Temple. But the walls of the new temple were to exclude no one.

Assemblies of the Old and New Covenants

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In today's second reading from Hebrews (12:18-19, 22-24a), the two covenants, of Moses and of Christ, are compared. This remarkably beautiful passage contrasts two great assemblies of people: that of the Israelites gathered at Mount Sinai for the sealing of the old covenant and the promulgation of the Mosaic law, and that of the followers of Jesus gathered at Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the assembly of the new covenant. This latter scene, marked by the presence of countless angels and of Jesus with his redeeming blood, is reminiscent of the celestial liturgies of the Book of Revelation.

The Mosaic covenant is shown to have originated in fear of God and threats of divine punishment (12:18-21). The covenant in Christ gives us direct access to God (22), makes us members of the Christian community, God's children, a sanctified people (23), who have Jesus as mediator to speak for us (12:24). Not to heed the voice of the risen Christ is a graver sin than the rejection of the word of Moses (12:25-26). Though Christians fall away, God's kingdom in Christ will remain and his justice will punish those guilty of deserting it (12:28-29).

Cardinal Newman's weapons of saints

It is good to reflect on the words of the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman in one of his memorable sermons on today's Gospel entitled: "The Weapons of Saints."

<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume6/sermon22.html>

He writes: "There is a mysterious connexion between real advancement and self-abasement. If you minister to the humble and despised, if you feed the hungry, tend the sick, succour the distressed; if you bear with the froward, submit to insult, endure ingratitude, render good for evil, you are, as by a divine charm, getting power over the world and rising among the creatures. God has established this law. Thus He does His wonderful works. His instruments are poor and despised; the world hardly knows their names, or not at all. They are busied about what the world thinks petty actions, and no one minds them. They are apparently set on no great works; nothing is seen to come of what they do: they seem to fail. Nay, even as regards religious objects which they themselves profess to desire, there is no natural and visible connexion between their doings and sufferings and these desirable ends; but there is an unseen connexion in the kingdom of God. They rise by falling. Plainly so, for no condescension can be so great as that of our Lord Himself. Now the more they abase themselves the more like they are to Him; and the more like they are to Him, the greater must be their power with Him."

Mother Teresa's etiquette

As we remember Blessed Teresa of Calcutta on her 100th birthday (Aug. 26), and the 13th anniversary of her death on Sept. 5, let her words ring in our ears and in our communities this week. She understood well the table talk and etiquette of Luke and of Jesus.

"People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.

"If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

"If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.
Succeed anyway.

"If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.
Be honest and sincere anyway.

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"What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.

"If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.

"The good you do today, will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.

"Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.

"In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

[The readings for 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time are Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29; Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a;
Luke 14:1, 7-14]

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