

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A few months ago while distributing Communion, I noticed my girls coming up with their other dad, as they often do. And I prepared to do what I have so often done and that is to reach out with my thumb and to offer them a little blessing on their forehead. But on this day, to my surprise, those two-year-old little girls reached out their arms and held them together to receive Communion like everyone else.

And I don't know where that came from. I don't know what got triggered in their little heads or in their little hearts to decide to do that on that day, but they had decided to join in. And there they were reaching out with huge grins on their faces. And suddenly as a parent, I see myself in a situation where without any preparation, without any chance to think this through or to decide what age should they be, isn't there a class for this, shouldn't we talk about this as a family, isn't this a photo op, where's grandma when we need her? This was all just happening right in front of us.

And so I took a second, I looked at Joe, he seemed fine with it. And then my mind flashed to all the stories that I've heard over the years of people being denied Communion. For any number of reasons, a divorce, they were baptized in the wrong church, because of who they were or who they loved. And I thought who am I, of all people, to do that to them? And then it occurred to me that as they go through life, they will come to know all too well what it's like to feel excluded because of where they live, because of what schools they go to, because of what friends they have or maybe what friends they don't have, what brands they wear, who their parents are and on and on.

And I suddenly found myself falling in love with the idea that at the Lord's table, at least, they will never know what it feels like to be turned away. They will never know what it feels like to be excluded, that when it comes to the Lord's table, at least, they will only ever know welcome. And by the way, if that isn't the practice in your family, if that wasn't your tradition, if you did it differently, amen.

I am positive there is more than one way to honor that amazing moment. I'm just sharing with you the epiphany that I had and the lesson that those two girls taught me on that day. Because it is also one that I hear in today's gospel. Today, Jesus has also been invited to a meal and He is noticing how the various guests are anxiously jockeying for the most prestigious seat at the table. And He knows that He Himself is also being closely watched.

So He chooses to step back and to offer a parable. The first half of which can sound a little mundane, a little bit like savvy advice on how to avoid embarrassment at VIP events. Sit at the lowest seat so that you will be spared the public humiliation of being asked to move down in the event someone more prestigious arrives.

But remember, this is a parable. It's a story that sits alongside a much larger truth. One that I hear calling us to reject systems of hierarchy and pecking order and prestige, to refuse to

participate in them no matter how common the practice might be in our world, no matter how enticing the invitation might be, reject them because a life spent jockeying for the VIP seats, for the right recognition, to live in the right zip codes, to only be seen at the right restaurants or to join the right clubs, or to cozy up to the right people is all a fool's errand because there will always be someone, there will always be something that will knock you off whatever pedestal you think you've reached.

And then what? Our wisdom reading warns us we would have spent our life choosing pride and ego over God. You can't do both. And when we are gone, we are warned that we would have nothing to show for our lives the very memory of them would be erased from the earth. Jesus is telling us that the rat race of pride and prestige can only be won when we refuse to participate. And that the kingdom of God will never be about where we sit, it will always be about who we gave up our seat up to.

I served on the Board of Directors of San Diego's largest homeless service agency for a number of years. And one year I was invited to the Mayor's luxury box at the San Diego Padres Stadium. They had just built this brand new, beautiful stadium and I jumped at the chance to go. And oh was it nice. It had an amazing buffet spread, great local craft beer, air conditioning, luxury seats. I felt like a true VIP, rubbing elbows with San Diego's movers and shakers. And then I looked at the view of the cityscape and I realized I was looking in the direction of the homeless shelter that we were managing for the city. A series of giant tents where hundreds of people and families crowded into bunks, three layers high. And it suddenly hit me how far removed I was from the people we had been trying to serve.

The next year we were invited once again but this time we sent homeless people in our place. And the following year, the mayor cut the budget altogether for luxury boxes. It was almost as if we had kind of all come to our senses after a brief relapse. And I think that's what Jesus would also have us do in these moments, to step back as He did and to notice, notice our ego, notice our pride, notice when it's gotten the best of us. No matter how flattering the invitation might be and no matter how common, no matter the fact that everyone else is also doing it, we are called to not just reject it but to even speak up to call us back to our humility.

And that brings us to the second half of the parable that when we are hosts that we also not fall into the same trap and only open our tables up to those who look like us, who talk like us, who went to schools like us, who run in the same circles as we do, but instead when we draw up our guest lists that we might draw a circle of compassion so wide that no one would be left off.

Hebrews reminds us that our calling isn't merely to serve the poor or to care for those who are persecuted but to remember them as if they were us, as if we were being persecuted right alongside them. The goal, you see, isn't merely to serve those at the margins but to stand with them shoulder to shoulder until the margins are no more.

One of my heroes, Father Greg Boyle, he puts it this way; service, as important as it is – and Lord do we do a lot of it around here, but as important as it is, we should never forget that it's really just a hallway, a hallway that leads to the grand dance of them all, the

banquet room, the ballroom, where we can finally dance together and to the dream of God that we might all be one.

I caught a glimpse of this one time when we were doing Ashes-to-Go. Have you seen that? That's where you take Ash Wednesday out on to the streets and you offer it whoever walks by. And we have been doing it for years and I was looking to kind of push the envelope a little. So rather than go to the mall or to Starbucks, we went to a bus station in one of the rougher areas of town. And we had a nice line of folks wanting to come and receive their ashes before getting on the bus to work. But I saw out of the corner of my eye a homeless man standing over to the side watching us. He kept his distance. But as the line ended, I caught his eye and he finally walked over.

He was an elderly man. He had a long gray beard. His hair was matted. His skin was sunburned and weathered from far too many years on the streets. And he stood in front of me and he stared at the ground, and finally asked, "Is this for me, too?" And in that moment, his shame met mine. His that he might not be good enough and mine that we had somehow allowed the church of Jesus Christ to be mistaken for a place where he felt he needed to ask.

I gave him his ashes, blessed him and we prayed together. Yet none of that solved the problems of where he would sleep that night. Yet I could tell by the way he stood up just a bit straighter, the way we embraced as we parted company that day, somehow in the magic of that moment, we had restored a part of his humanity, and in the process he restored some of mine.

The author of Hebrews is reminding us that our calling isn't only to serve the poor but to stand with them, that the measure of our compassion can never be only our willingness to send them food or to send them blankets or shoes, but in our willingness to send ourselves, to be in fellowship with them, to be in kinship, to break bread with them until there is no more them, only us.

Collecting food or hygiene products, or blankets or any of that, it is a good step, an important one. It makes a difference. Amen. And we should never forget that it's just a step. Erecting temporary shelters for homeless people can literally save lives. It is an important step, a beautiful one. And we should never forget, it is also just a step. It is not the place we ever want to stop. It's not an institution we ever want to maintain. We always want to be asking God, "What's next?" How might we open our tables and open our lives just a bit more each time so that we might take another step, and another and another until together we reach the upper room. And the heavenly banquet that awaits where all, all are guests of honor.

Like the skeptical Pharisees who so closely watched Jesus, we should also remind ourselves that we, too, are being watched by a skeptical world looking to see if the followers of Jesus if we have a new light that we might shine, one that transcends the old dynamics of service provider and service recipient, one that transcends the old transactions between the haves and the have nots. And as we reel in the wake of yet another mass shooting, they are watching us to see if we might show the world a new way of being with one another.

Someone once told me that they caught a sight, they caught a glimpse of that world one day at the altar rail on a Sunday when they saw kneeling, shoulder to shoulder a widow who had recently lost her husband, who was kneeling next to a gay man, who was kneeling next to a homeless woman, who was kneeling next to the all pro quarterback of the Chargers. That's the table that we model right here each Sunday. It's the table that my girls wanted so much to be a part of. It's the table where we re-assemble our broken humanity as we remember Christ. And that's why we practice it here each week, so that with God's help, we might make it a way of life out there.

We were talking about this reading on Thursday at a service that we do at one of the local retirement communities. And it was a small service and we get into a kind of a dialogue sometimes and someone the end said, "You realize if we were to really do this that it would disrupt everything." To which I said, "Yes. Yes, it would." Amen.

[End of Recording]