

Nasrudin the Hodja, was considered both a holy man and a wise fool in 13th century Turkey.

Once Nasrudin was invited to a wedding banquet and showed up to the event in his normal attire, which was a bit shoddy to be honest. No one greeted the holy man, or seated him at the meal. So Nasrudin went home and changed clothes, putting on his most elaborate coat. When he returned to the feast, the host greeted him with warmth and sat him in a place of honor. The guests chatted with him and made much of his attendance. When the soup arrived, Nasrudin plunged his sleeves deep into the bowl, and said “my coat, you must eat this delicious soup.” When the startled host asked Nasrudin what he was doing, the hodja replied, “When I came to the banquet wearing my other clothes, no one offered me anything to eat. When I returned in my best coat I was seated at the place of honor. So I can only assume it was my coat that was invited and not me.”¹

We know when we are the recipients of true hospitality, and when we are participating in really authentic table fellowship. And we know when we’re not.

In the ancient world hospitality – and the ability to be a good host and a gracious guest -- was a central value. Honor depended on it. And that makes sense when you consider the vulnerability of nomadic groups and displaced people. Strangers, sojourners, refugees, wanderers were common. Much better to first offer a cup of tea, some shade, a meal, kind words, than invite hostility in unpredictable times. And who knows, perhaps the visitor brought something the household might need. So the author of our reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews says: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

How well have we mastered this ancient value, in these millennia of theological and intellectual progress? Martin Luther King famously said that 11 O’Clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. And not much has changed since then. A 2015 study from Lifeways Research Group from 2015 found that 8 out of 10 congregations in this country are made up of predominantly one racial group, and that two-thirds of people interviewed felt that they liked it like that, nothing more need be done.²

It looks to me like today’s liturgy is calling us to do something different around our communion tables and around the other tables in our community. What if we considered

¹ (adapted from <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/hodja.html#nasreddin>)

² <http://lifewayresearch.com/2015/01/15/sunday-morning-in-america-still-segregated-and-thats-ok-with-worshippers/>

our capacity for hospitality, our ability to be kind hosts and gracious guests, a measure of our capacity for the kingdom of God?

In our Scriptures, this often seems to be a particular obligation and a challenge for the wealthy. They would have the means to throw the party or sponsor the banquet. The wealthy were crucial to the survival of the early Christian church because they had the houses big enough for groups to meet in and eventually to hide in. They had more to give to the common treasury or to the fund-raising campaign to support new churches –Saint Paul don't forget was a chief development officer as well as an evangelist in the early church.

But that also gave the wealthy a lot of power at those early love feasts; they could determine the guest list, bring in their own people, exert their privilege and their status, perhaps without even realizing it. It's this challenge that Jesus addresses today in the story from Luke.

It begins: *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

Ever been at a gathering where everybody is watching everybody else to scope out the unwritten rules of who's on top and who's not, who's in and who's out? Another word for that is 7th grade.

And I think it's safe to say that Jesus feels their eyes on him. He knows the dynamics at this party, is watching everyone jockey for the prized seat. So he decides to mess with the host by riffing on a passage from Proverbs: *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. (Proverbs 25:6-7)*

I wonder if everybody started running to the end of the table and competing for the lowest seat in order to get in good with Jesus. Was it like a game of musical chairs? Who was sitting next to Jesus when the music stopped? And *where* was Jesus sitting?

While Jesus was recalling Israel's ancient wisdom around the behavior of guests, the Greeks and Romans of Luke's audience would have been astounded at this suggestion. Important people didn't lower themselves on purpose. Jesus might as well have put his sleeves in the soup and started making slurping sounds.

What's important here is not the rules of etiquette that Jesus was suggesting, but the kind of relationship that is required to have supper in the Kingdom of God. He wants people to set aside their hang ups about the guest list and to welcome all who show up. Or better yet, to actively seek out those who really needed to be at this table. Because they might not have had the social freedom to just walk in the door. And they might just have gifts that the rest of the community really needs.

The author of Hebrews, who is writing to first century Christians, calls this value “mutual love.” Mutuality is at the heart of hospitality, and it’s perhaps one of the most tricky values to maintain. Because it requires more than equality and balance, it requires empathy and a shared vulnerability. So the author of Hebrews suggests: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

Mutuality also requires that fluid practice of giving and receiving that love makes possible, and it assumes giftedness all around. God’s very incarnation as Jesus is an act of mutuality with humanity. God as the consummate host invites us into the divine life. And as the most gracious guest, God enters our humanity and takes a seat at the end of the table.

And then invites us to do the same.

But how do we master the give and receive of mutuality without it devolving into a transaction, I scratch your back, you scratch mine? How do we avoid the power play behind the phrase “it’s better to give than to receive” where the giver would never want to be in the position of being the one who has needs?

Well, we practice. The Greek root of the word hospitality is Xenos, and it means both host and guest. Our liturgy is a laboratory for this, for being both host and guest, giver and receiver. ...And it comes with a free meal.

If you want to sharpen your mutuality skills today, chat awhile with anyone who is recently arrived and give them a newcomer’s card (they’re in front of you in the pew). Spend some time with folks you don’t know very well at the reception in the parish hall. **And also notice who is missing.** Have some folks slipped away over time? Does our open communion table look like our community, reflecting its diversity in race, economics, physical and mental abilities, health and age? Do we have some inviting to do?

Are there other meals or tables where we can practice mutuality during the week? Family dinners? Cafeteria tables? Board tables?

I do want to say that the physical plant here at St. Peter’s gives it a lot of inviting capacity for people with various physical abilities. We have meeting rooms and church sanctuary on one floor. There is at least one ADA compliant bathroom. There is air conditioning. We can put captioning on our screen if need be. Who might benefit from the access alone?

What we’re practicing here isn’t just table manners. We are practicing a much more radical ethics: a reversal that requires the last to be first and the first to be last, that invites the giver to receive and the receiver to give.

Our Scriptures today are particularly targeted to those who have means to expand the guest list and to make room for those who are typically excluded from the table. And so if you fit in that category.. ask yourself and ask God, do I have some inviting to do?

Amen.