

Proper 17
Ecclesiasticus 10:12-18
Hebrews 13:1-8
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Places of Honor

My grandfather on my father's side was one of four brothers from parents that still took their Welsh root seriously. I never knew him but by all accounts he was smart, funny, charming—hard living, hard drinking, admired by the men and loved by the ladies. He went to law school and passed the California bar exam but never really practiced law, in part due to the stock market crash and the Great Depression. Opportunities that he had hoped to be there, just weren't, and with a family to support, he had to find something else and so he got a job as a cop in Long Beach. While it was not the career he had dreamed of, it was the job that allowed him to provide for his family.

One of the things he had to do from time to time, was go to houses the banks had foreclosed on, an all too common thing back then (which is beginning to feel depressingly familiar in our time as well) to make sure the people were still not living

in them, and if they were, to clear them from the property. It was something he hated to do, because beneath all his swagger and bravado, was a soft-hearted man.

As a result, according to my dad who was a little boy at the time, it was not at all uncommon for my grandfather to bring the people he found at these houses home because they had nowhere else to go. And/or in lieu of that, give them some kind of job around his house, such as gardening or housekeeping; apparently my grandmother even had a chauffeur at one time because all this one man was really good at was driving, none of which was needed, but at least they would have some work and an income, however small, to be able to maintain their dignity and hopefully get back on their feet.

It was another time and era, and it is hard to imagine doing something like now—if nothing else, my grandfather's actions would probably be looked at as suspicious, if not foolish or even dangerous.

But it's important to remember that there weren't county welfare offices as we think of them now, places where people could go for help—however adequate or inadequate it may be, or many large church or social service organizations such as Episcopal Community Services, Father Joe's Villages or Alpha Project that could help to alleviate the crushing human need. Much of the help provided to people was done through the kindness of one man (person) or family at a time.

Unfortunately, while it would be nice to say, because of the resources that are now available, such crushing needs no longer exist in this time and era, but clearly that's not the case. A few examples from the news just this week:

Leading up to this Labor Day weekend, there was an article from the *San Diego Union Tribune* on Wednesday that noted even though the median family income has gone up slightly (which the article actually attributed more to an increased number of persons working per family, as opposed to higher wages), the number of persons without health insurance

has also gone up. People are declaring bankruptcy because of health care costs.

We also observed the two year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and while there has been some progress in rebuilding the Gulf area, the amount of work that remains to be done is immense. There are still people that are without adequate shelter with no hope of finding some any time soon.

So even though we do now have various government assistance programs, and organizations such as ECS, the ability of those organizations to meet the very real needs out there still often depends on the kindness of one person or family at a time.

In light of all this, we as Christians know we are called to respond, to serve others—how can we profess to love our neighbors as ourselves if we don't respond? But if we left it at that, I'm afraid we would be missing the point because the "should" in that always sets up an "us vs. them" dynamic (the poor vs. the well off or at least less poor, and so on) that ignores

or overlooks what it is that we hold in common, not the least of which is that we are all created out of love by God.

The “should” in this call is also a rather joyless response. It becomes more a requirement of faith—more of an “Excuse me, but I got to go help the poor again,” rather than being seen as one of the most faithful, if not the most faithful way any of us can follow Jesus.

For when we look at the life and teachings of Jesus, we see that he spent most of his time talking about how and why we take care of one another.

But he didn't just talk about it, he also challenged his listeners, and to us today, to actually do it—to heal, to teach, to proclaim, to provide for those in need: in other words, to be conscious of what's going on, and respond.

And to do it, not for glory, not for recognition—not to have our name listed in the society column, but because it is through serving others, serving interests apart from our own, entertaining angels without knowing it, that we really come to know God.

In the parable of the wedding banquet which we just heard, it is hard to think about anything more counter-intuitive than giving up the good seats at the table so to speak. When I picture it, it's almost like a scene from a Marx Brother's movie where you have two persons each trying to top the other in graciousness and good manners, "you take the good seat," "oh no, I couldn't, you take the good seat,"

But yet in many ways, that is exactly what we are called to do "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Our notions of privilege are not God's.

But in order to do this, each one of us must undertake a journey of the heart to discover not just what it is that keeps us from following Jesus in this way, but also to understand what gifts we have been given, and how they can be used, so that we can follow him. And to do so with humbleness because we are not in control of the outcome.

And this journey, this discernment process, lasts a lifetime because it encompasses all that we are, all that we have done

and our hopes and dreams for our lives, for God desires to use all these things to the benefit of the whole of creation.

This journey is as important a spiritual practice as anyone we will ever undertake because the movement from self focus to service focus, allows us to catch a glimpse of, and perhaps even begin to understand, and believe, in God's great love.

In Celtic Christianity, we talk of what's called the thin places, the places where the division between heaven and earth is so sheer so as to almost disappear—the presence of the holy is palpable. But these thin places are not just locations, for we can also find them when through the grace of God, we touch the life of someone else, someone in need.

We find these thin places in the smiling faces of the children at Dorcas House when volunteer come to simply spend time with them; we find them in the relief of people who finally have access to good health care and all those who help make that happen; we find them in lives of those who finally have a proper place to live and those who helped build the

houses. We can even find them in the deeds of an eccentric cop from Long Beach.

But it doesn't end there. For the fact is that each one of us has been given the privilege to be a portal to the thin places for someone else, and really, there is no greater place of honor than that.

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2 September 2007