

May what is spoken here, and what is heard
be spoken and heard in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Perhaps I have been overly conditioned by centuries
of artistic renditions,
but I carry in my head an image of Jesus
as a scruffy sort of character -
someone who rarely - if ever - went to a barber,
a person whose wardrobe was a bit limited,
and someone who couldn't have cared less
about which fork to use at a dinner party.

So I hear today's appointed Gospel reading, from Luke,
in which Jesus sounds an awful like Miss Manners
trying to teach the Social Graces,
and my first reactions is: 'what's wrong with this picture?'.
Something just doesn't compute.

But there it is.
In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus hand out not just one,
but two bits of mannerly advice.

The first bit of advice is this:
when someone invites you to a dinner party,
don't waltz in and take the best seat at the table,
in case someone more important than you arrives
and your host has to move you down the social ladder.
That's just plain embarrassing - for everybody.

Instead, seat yourself at the worst seat,
and give your host the opportunity
to invite you up the social ladder, to a better seat.

Frankly, that sounds to me like perfectly good advice,
even if it comes from what I would consider
a highly unlikely source.

If you think about it, Jesus makes really good sense,
because if we follow the strategy that He suggests,
we really can't lose.

For starters, we won't look bad.

There's no way we can look bad,
and we may just end up looking not just good,
but good and humble at the same time.

What's more, it doesn't cost anything.

We don't have to open either our wallets - or our hearts,
and our pride stays intact,
and we're going to get a good meal, no matter where we sit.

It seems to me that Jesus as Miss Manners
has written some good stuff about how to be socially acceptable,
whether we're invited to a fancy dinner party,
or whether we're trying to climb the corporate ladder,
or if we're simply trying to fit in.

So far, the business of following Jesus seems rather simple,
little more than low-risk, high-yield, street-smart behavior.

Except.

Except that I don't think Jesus had any intention
of being the arbiter of the social graces.

If that had been his goal,
surely he would have looked different,
he certainly would have dressed differently,
and he most definitely have acted differently.

And ... He probably would have stopped with that first bit of advice -
the one about choosing carefully where we sit.

Surely He never would have spoken the second bit of advice
that we heard in today's Gospel reading,
which is that when you entertain -
 whether it's a fancy dinner party or a holiday picnic -
 or even a holy meal on a Sunday morning -
don't invite just your friends or relatives or rich neighbors.
Don't invite the ones who will invite you back,
 or who may vote for you in the next election,
 or who control your next promotion.

Instead, invite the ones who can't repay you;
 invite those from whom you have nothing to gain.
Welcome the poor, the lame, and the blind.
Open your doors to those who don't 'fit',
 those who don't even know the social norms,
 much less conform to them.

That bit of advice -
 not only for back then, but also for here and now -
 sounds neither politic nor street-smart.
I'd even go so far as to suggest that it sounds just plain stupid.
Jesus as Miss Manners seems to have lost his touch.

But, Jesus wasn't Miss Manners.
Jesus probably wasn't even concerned about the social graces.

Because in the world of social graces,
 the currency that has real buying power
 has to do with greater and lesser places of honor,
 and with entertaining others so that they will entertain us.
It has to do with looking good - especially compared to others,
 and with covering our backsides.
I has to do with self-seeking choices.

The world where social graces rule the day
 uses lots of language about 'rights' -
 my rights as opposed to your rights, for example -
 when things like seating arrangements are determined.
The world where social graces dominate
 can be cold and unfriendly and adversarial and scary.

But Jesus wasn't talking about social graces;
Jesus was talking about God's grace.
And that world has a very different currency.

That world is a place where all are invited - and welcome -
whether we're rich or poor, sighted or blind, limber or lame,
and no matter what language we speak,
whether is the Queen's English or jargon from the Bronx,
and no matter whether we hail from Old Lyme, Connecticut
or from New Zealand.
In that world there are no greater or lesser seats.

The place Jesus describes - and invites us to enter -
is the Kingdom of Heaven,
and it is also every place on this earth
that strives to be the threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven.
So the place that Jesus describes is this place -
Saint Ann's Church in Old Lyme, Connecticut,
this very morning, August the twenty-ninth,
in the year of our Lord 2010.

We come to this place
not because we're grand or important or even competent,
which we might even be,
but we come to this place because we're loved,
and because there is a seat for us,
at the table that matters, God's table.
We are here, because in a world that - as we all know, I'm sure -
can be cold and unfriendly and adversarial and frightening,
we need to know that we're loved.

We come to this place not because we're perfect,
but because we're not.

And that's OK.

We don't have to look good compared to anyone else.
Our only standard is the perfection of Jesus Christ,
and despite the fact that we fall short,
we are still invited and welcome.

We're invited not because of who we are,
but because of whose we are.
And we come to this place not to claim what is ours by 'rights',
but to receive what is ours as a gift.

We come to this place not because it's socially graced,
but because it is graced by God.
We're here not to improve our social skills or our social standing,
but for holy hospitality - given and received.

We Christians - you and I -
inhabit both the world of social graces
and the Kingdom of God's grace.
And our role is to help draw those two orbits closer,
to help God's Kingdom be seen and known
and strived for and celebrated.

So we're also here so that when we leave this place,
we can - as the Letter to the Hebrews urges -
show hospitality to rich and poor, sighted and blind,
limber and lame, and even to strangers.
And maybe we too will entertain angels without knowing it.

And we do that in the name of the God
who invites us into the Kingdom
and has guaranteed our place at the table
not by Miss Manners,
but by the life and love and death and resurrection
of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Rev. Nancy Miller