

Status, in God's Eyes

In today's passage from Jeremiah, what we have is a covenant lawsuit the Lord brings against Israel for its faithlessness. Jeremiah says the people of Israel, in particular the religious leaders, are going after worthless things, seeking things that do not profit.

One thing we human beings tend to seek after, is status – or at least, being reassured of our place in the scheme of things.

Which brings me to the Gospel. Today's passage from Luke is about status, at a meal.

It has been said that eating is the primary way of maintaining human relationships. To know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat, is to know the character of their society. That's from Peter Farb, an anthropologist who studied and wrote back in the sixties and seventies.

I've a paragraph I'd like to read for you. As you listen, see if you can guess when it was written. It's about a meal the writer took part in, about what was served by his host:

Some very elegant dishes were served up to himself and a few more of the company; while the dishes that were placed before the rest were cheap and paltry. He had apportioned in small flagons three different sorts of wine; but you are not to suppose it was so the guests might take their choice: on the contrary, it was so they might not choose at all. One was for himself and me; the next for his friends of lower order (for you must know that he measures out his friendship according to the degrees of quality); and the third for his servants and mine.

This was written around the year 100, by Pliny the Younger, a magistrate in Ancient Rome. Status at meals – it's everywhere, in all times.

I would like you to do a little exercise. Please think, please remember: When was there a time, an event, when you were, or became, especially aware of social status, having to do with eating?

How did that sit with you, when you took notice of this kind of social distinction?

I'll share with you one good memory I have. Once when I was a layperson in a church, I was invited by the priest to go to a diocesan banquet. I was reluctant. I felt I was not important, that such banquets were for the 'movers and shakers' in the diocese. That priest did a wonderful thing: He told me not to judge such a thing, and certainly not to judge critically my own unimportance. He said all are welcome at God's table; I should know this always, and presume this always.

I regret to say I did not go, anyway. I am a slow learner! But what he taught me, stuck, somewhere deep inside.

I have another, somewhat less happy memory. When I was in seminary, I did a year of field education with a church in suburban Boston. This was in a town that certainly had sections that were rather well-off. When I was starting there, it was important to get to know people, and one of the people I wanted to get to know was the Senior Warden (who seemed rather well-off herself), so she and I made a date to get together for dinner. This was of course her town, so I deferred to her to make the choice of where we were to eat, and I would meet her there.

When I arrived at the place she chose, I was somewhat surprised. It looked more like a lunch place; it had a counter and several small tables, a fairly standard menu. Not that I needed a fancy place, I was just surprised. Then the waitress came to take our order. I told her what I wanted, and then the Senior Warden said to her, "I would just like a cup of tea; I'll be eating later, elsewhere."

So it would seem that I did not pass muster. She was showing me a world of social distinction that I had not directly experienced before, although I certainly knew such differences existed. I did not bear her any ill feeling; indeed, she and the people of that congregation warmly supported my ministry. I guess this was just part of the educating of a priest.

One more memory, and from this one I learned quite a lot. It has to do with the Foyers program; I believe some of you were familiar with that. This was a church program in which groups of people in a parish got together for a very simple meal, maybe even just for dessert or something, first in one person's home, and then the next. Priests introduced me to Foyers, and offered the rationale for the program: it was for simple Christian fellowship, for equality and commonality.

I am very grateful to the priests I knew then, who sometimes shared with me a gentle frustration they had, like when a host would engage in a bit of one-up-man-ship, trying to set a better table than the last host. This of course went against what the program was trying to accomplish. Priests also tried to find a way around real barriers, like how to include folks who wanted to participate – but could not because their humble accommodations could not manage such a gathering. When priests gave voice to these issues, they taught me rather a lot, about what Jesus was trying to say.

Let's look at what Jesus did say, in today's Gospel: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." The ones who *cannot* reciprocate.

It has been suggested that Jesus may have been influenced by, may have spent time at, forward-thinking Jewish communities like the one at Qumran.

To give some perspective on how hard it is, what Jesus is trying to accomplish ... how different his standards are ... listen to this quote, from the Dead Sea Scrolls. It shows that the folks Jesus wants us to invite, are the very ones who were barred from entry into the Qumran community:

And let no person smitten with any human impurity enter the Assembly of God. And every person smitten with these impurities, unfit to occupy a place in the midst of the

Congregation, and every (person) smitten in his flesh, paralyzed in his feet or hands, lame or blind or deaf, or dumb or smitten in his flesh with a blemish visible to the eye, or any aged person that totters and is unable to stand firm in the midst of the Congregation: let these persons not enter.

Do we have any aged people who totter, here? Oh that's right, we welcome you, don't we.

And do we not all take our places, equals alongside one another, when we receive the Eucharist, the same bread, every one of us?

Let us be conscious of these matters of social status. Let's keep in mind the different standards we hold to, as the church. Keep in mind the exercise we did, remembering when we noticed status distinctions. Note how pervasive it is, this drive in us humans to make such distinctions.

And consider also, that part of this drive, may have to do with us seeking to be reassured, of our place ... reassured, that we are accepted. Sometimes we look in the wrong direction for this. Seek after things that do not really profit.

In this Gospel, when Jesus talks about *honor*, he's using a word that is usually translated as *glory*. So this is not about the recognition we receive from others. But rather, it is about the glory that belongs to God – and that only God can give.

Jesus promises, when we *include* people whom others *reject*, that “you will be blessed.” He is changing the game. It is no longer about being praised by other people. Rather, it is about praise and blessing from God. God is ultimately the only one who can bless us. God is ultimately the only one, whose praise matters.

Jesus says, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Humility is not a thing we use, as a strategy to gain recognition. Rather: ***Humility is a quality of life open to persons who know that their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers but by the certainty that God has accepted them.*** That's a beautiful line, from Alan Culpepper, in his commentary on this Gospel.

We accept, acceptance. And we humbly, pass it on.

As for status, let's remember what Jesus says. And make his standards, true for us.