

INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED



Luke 14:12 "(Jesus) also said to the (leader of the Pharisees who had invited him to eat a meal on the sabbath), 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"

This parish has been known over the years for its lavish meals, courtly dinners, extravagant Fetes, and other fine celebrations, so I am wondering how this morning's Gospel sounded to you all? For I imagine that at those parish events, the focus was on the honored and distinguished company, on friends, and relatives, and rich neighbors. I imagine that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind were not

specifically invited to any of them, those who cannot repay us for our generosity and kindness, though perhaps we entertained some angels without knowing it with our hospitality. Still Jesus' words are uncomfortable, I suspect. They are counterintuitive to our culture and our cultural values today, just as they were back then, when Jesus first spoke them.

As I mentioned two weeks ago, Jesus was at odds with many of the cultural values of his day. For instance, he spoke openly with the Samaritan woman at the well, astounding even his own disciples in doing so. He ate with the sinners and tax-collectors. He healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, an enemy of his people, and the slave of a Roman Centurion, occupiers of the Jewish State. He did not teach like the scribes and Pharisees. Elsewhere Jesus allowed a woman who was a known sinner to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair and then kissing them while at dinner at the house of a Pharisee named Simon. Jesus openly broke the Sabbath law and publicly criticized and mocked the religious and political leaders of his day, violently overturning the tables in the Temple, and chasing out the moneychangers with a whip. He was deliberately shaking things up, I believe, turning the world upside down, or perhaps more likely right side up."

In the next verses following today's Gospel, one of the dinner guests there at the home of one of the leaders of the

Pharisees, on hearing these words (from Jesus), said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'" So then Jesus turned and went on to tell them all the Parable of the Great Banquet, you know the one, where the intended guests were all too busy with their own lives to come to the feast, so the master said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and alleyways of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame," further emphasizing his earlier suggestion to his host about whom to invite to his sabbath feasts, and perhaps hinting that those who had been invited had dishonored the master's invitations.

I am reminded here of a wonderful book entitled "The Meaning in the Miracles" by Jeffrey John. The miracles by Jesus, he noted, attest to the divine power at work in the world around us. But these miracles were not done simply to impress the crowd. They were done instead to advance the mission of God, a mission that extends far beyond the compassion shown to these particular few sufferers, who appear as characters in the miracle stories. These miracles have universal significance for us, Jeffrey writes. They are not freak events that happened to a handful of lucky people in a small corner of the world two thousand years ago. These miracles reveal ways by which God seeks to transform the world around us, even at this moment.

In his book, Jeffrey John believes that the healing miracles of Jesus need to be seen in contrast to the Jewish purity laws found earlier in the Bible. About these miracles, he writes, "They seem to have been deliberately selected by the evangelists to show Jesus healing at least one of every category of persons who, according to the purity laws of Jesus' society, were specifically excluded and labeled unclean, or who were set at varying degrees of distance from worship in the inner temple," people like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Among the groups thus excluded were: women, lepers, Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, children, people with various handicaps, and the dead. Jeffrey John goes on to speak of the universal significance of Jesus' miracles, which is: "the overturning of religious and social barriers; the abolition of taboos; and Jesus' declaration of God's love and compassion for everyone, expressed in the systematic inclusion of each class of the previously excluded or marginalized."

So, the healing miracles, most if not all of them, fulfill a mission that can be expressed in Jeffrey John's simple phrase: "Including the Excluded." The public ministry of Jesus is in large part dedicated to this very effort. And the people around him recognized that he was overturning old standards. Some

rejoiced at this, others were just bewildered, still others were indignant, and turned against him and plotted his demise. These healings are signs of the breaking in of a new order, a new kingdom, the reign of God in the world. They reveal that God's mission is radically inclusive, that it includes the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. God mission is, as our Catechism declares, the reconciliation of all people to God and to each other through Christ Jesus our Lord, not just the ritually clean and socially acceptable.

Oddly, Jeffrey John soon found himself to be a part of the excluded of our society today. When I was studying at Oxford, he was the Dean of Divinity at Mary Magdalene College. He was later appointed Dean of St. Alban's Cathedral in London. He made headlines in 2003 when he was the first person nominated to be a Church of England bishop to have been openly in a same-sex relationship. Note here that Jeffrey and his partner declared their long standing relationship was celibate, but that did not matter. The nomination led to controversy both in the Church of England and in the wider Anglican Communion. A significant number of conservative Anglican leaders from around the world stated their intention to split from the Anglican Communion if the consecration went ahead. Concerns over the potential for division led Rowan Williams, who was then Archbishop of Canterbury, but who was earlier one of my tutors at Oxford, to

pressure Jeffrey John to withdraw his name, which he did.

Interestingly the following year, Gene Robinson was elected in the United States to be the first openly gay bishop in a same sex relationship in the Anglican Communion, again amidst a great deal of controversy both here and abroad, a controversy that lives on today. In the years since then, Jeffrey has reportedly been considered for at least seven diocesan bishoprics across England, Wales and the Isle of Man, but in each case was not appointed for fear of controversy.

Clearly clergy in same sex relationships are part of the 'excluded' of our larger church today. The worldwide Methodist Church is currently splitting over this very issue. Who else then are the excluded of today here in the United States and abroad? Several of the same groups as in the time of Jesus, I would think, would be still excluded, certainly: the poor, women, prostitutes, adulterers, children, the handicapped, all of whom are still marginalized in our day. But we need to add other groups as well, I imagine. I would suggest that people of color still are excluded in some way, just like the Samaritans and Gentiles of Jesus' day, but also undocumented immigrants, Muslims, ex-cons and their families, the maritally unsuccessful, and the extremely obese. Who else do you think has a place on this list of those our society marginalizes and ignores? Indeed, some of us may find ourselves on that list.

The challenge is that if we want to be loyal to Jesus and his mission, then we must, like him, include the excluded, in our lives, in our parishes, and in our ministries. This is why St. John's is collecting school backpacks and supplies for disadvantaged youth in our community, why we are organizing another Food Drive to support the poor and hungry, and another Blood Drive to help the sick and suffering. This is why St. John's allows its space to be used by the Literacy Volunteers helping immigrants, why we are resettling a refugee family, why we are starting a new Family Service. The challenge is that if we want to be loyal to Jesus and his mission, then we must, like him, include the excluded. We must invite into our parishes, our ministries, and indeed into our personal lives and interactions those who most others would dismiss and ignore, if not demean and disgrace. The real question is, do we? Amen.