

Opening Up

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 29 August 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14.

Each year in late August I find myself wistfully wanting to go back to school. I know that sounds corny—maybe it’s a mark of getting older. I have this urge to gobble up every learning opportunity I can sink my teeth into. And the temptation, I’m aware, arises out of the various back-to-school events that Liz and I attend each year around this time on behalf of our three kids.

This past week we got oriented for all three—at St. Richard’s for our fourth grader, at North Central High School for our sophomore, and in the thick of it all, at IU Bloomington on the momentous occasion of delivering our firstborn to college.

Transitions are challenging. But I really do relish these back-to-school experiences. I scan the course overviews and reading lists. I marvel at all the wisdom of the world that’s spread out for these kids to take in. It’s like being guided around the table of a great gourmet buffet. And I keep asking myself: When *I* was in fourth grade, in high school, heading off to college, why didn’t I do more to savor the feast that all these learning opportunities present?

One really does wonder: Why is education wasted on the young?

This time of school re-entry has also had this effect: It’s helped me appreciate the menu that’s before us this morning here in church, and specifically the gospel we’ve just heard. In this passage, there’s a higher message Jesus is trying to get across.

I

I say “higher” because at first blush his basic message seems clear enough. Any fourth grader would get it at a glance. It’s the same point the Proverbs writer articulates in what’s got to be the shortest in-church scripture passage of the entire three-year reading cycle. “Do not put yourself... in the place of the great,” advises the sage, “for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower...”

In a word: Be humble. It’s wise to be humble.

And yes, humility *is* a virtue. It’s good etiquette, too. Emily Post would no doubt concur. And certainly Jesus commends it—to the Pharisee dinner host, to the arrogant dinner guests, and to his overhearing disciples. And just to be sure they get this message, he tosses out

to the host a little follow-up reminder about including on your guest list not only your friends and relatives and rich neighbors but also “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Be humble, he urges—inclusive, too. That basic message is clear enough.

But something about it leaves me with the same sense I get from sampling just one tantalizing bite of dessert—I wish I had more. I wonder, how does one resolve to be humble? I mean, as soon as you say you’re humble, are you? I keep thinking of that obnoxious Dickens character, Uriah Heep—remember him?—boasting, again and again, “What an ’umble man I am.”

There must be more to this gospel passage today.

II

Well, there is more. And the clue is in the word “parable.” Whenever the gospel writers tell of Jesus speaking in parables, they’re cluing us in that he’s touching on some higher truth. And all the more so in this instance because here Jesus is observing an actual occurrence—the arrogant behavior of the dinner guests—and he’s interpreting it *as* a parable. Parables are pointers. Earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. And today Jesus is pointing to God’s relationship with us and ours with God—which is at the heart of our relationships with one another.

The heavenly meaning he’s pointing to is that God’s love for us is a gift. A great gourmet buffet to which all are invited, even those who at earthly tables would be consigned to the lowest places.

And what he’s saying stands out to me especially in light of my own slow-to-emerge love of learning. Through grade school and high school, I went to school because I had to. I was a naturally restless kid, and I didn’t want to be sitting in any seat at any table. Having to sit still anywhere was more than I could endure. I was not exactly what you’d call a diligent, self-motivated student.

Not until well after I headed off to college—almost at the end of first semester there—did the realization finally dawn on me: learning is my choice. I remember thinking one day, Heck, I don’t *have* to be sitting here in music history class enduring pompous Dr. Garlington holding forth on Josquin Des Pres and Claudio

Monteverdi if I don't want to. I can get myself out of this. Or I can get myself into it.

I decided to get myself into it. I made an appointment with Dr. Garlington. I expected him to cross me off his guest list—out of the class. Instead, not-so-pompous Dr. Garlington welcomed me, encouraged me, inspired me. And for the first time, I began to see and appreciate that the opportunity to learn is a gift.

Any opportunity to learn, whenever and however presented, is a gift. The question is: Will we accept it? Will we open ourselves up to take in the multitude of possibilities that learning presents?

Only an open vessel can be filled.

What I came to appreciate about loving to learn is what Jesus illustrates today about learning to love. God's love for us is a gift, a great gourmet buffet to which all are invited, serving up all the love we could ever learn. God's love is Jesus "stretch[ing] out [his] arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that all might come within the reach of [his] saving embrace," as the wonderful prayer says [*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 101]. God's love is a gift. The question is: Will we accept it? Will we open ourselves up to take in the multitude of possibilities that learning to love presents?

Jesus today urges us, just as long ago he urged the Pharisee, the dinner guests, and the overhearing disciples: Open yourselves up. Take your seats at the lowest place—because from there can you learn the most. And welcome in the unlikely guests—because they're the ones who need love the most.

Only an open vessel can be filled.

III

Robert Coles is for me one of the prominent examples nowadays of how an open vessel can be filled.

Coles is a renowned Harvard psychiatrist, as highly educated as any Pharisee of Jesus' time—the Pharisees being, by the way, some of the most highly educated among all the Jews of Jesus' time. Coles himself is Jewish, as was Jesus. Back in the 1980s, he wrote a biography of Dorothy Day, who was founder and leader of the Catholic Worker Movement. She was a champion of the poorest of the poor in our nation through much of the twentieth century. In that biography [*Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, Perseus Books 1987], Coles recalls the moment he first met Dorothy Day.

It was the spring of 1952. He was a medical student in New York City, uncertain as to whether he wanted to continue his studies. One afternoon he hopped on the subway just to get away from the hospital for a while. He went seeking Dorothy Day, about whom he'd read much and wanted to know more.

He found her in the kitchen of one of the Catholic Worker Movement houses she ran on the Lower East Side. She was chatting with a woman who was drunk, mentally ill, and incoherent. Here's how Coles describes the conversation he walked into:

I found myself increasingly confused by what seemed to be an interminable, essentially absurd exchange... When would it end—the alcoholic ranting and the silent nodding, occasionally interrupted by a brief question, which only served, maddeningly, to wind up the already overtalkative one rather than wind her down?

Eventually there was a lull, and Dorothy asked the woman if she'd mind an interruption. Dorothy then got up from her seat, approached Coles, and asked him, in all seriousness, "Are you waiting to talk with one of us?"

In the biography, Coles reflects: "*One of us*: with those three words [Dorothy Day] had [for me] cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege... [she had] scraped the hard bone of [my] pride..."

Jesus wants to scrape the hard bone of our pride. Jesus wants us to practice learning to love.

Here at Trinity Church we have seats open at all kinds of practicing and learning tables. You can visit the confused elderly in care centers around town... You can serve and sit down and dine with the poor, the hungry, the sometimes incoherent at our every-Sunday dinner at our Trinity Outreach Center next door... You can welcome anyone who walks into this church as one of us... You can teach children and lead teens, gleefully wasting education on the young... You can practice just about any rational or not-so-rational act of genuine giving and loving you're willing to sink your teeth into.

Welcome to the feast.

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TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
3243 NORTH MERIDIAN STREET
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46208
317-926-1346

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www.TrinityChurchIndy.org