

DINNER AT THE CASTAWAY KITCHEN

Luke 14:1, 7-14 Mark 2:14-17

February 28, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Mark 2:14-17 *As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples-- for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

Luke 13:22-35 ²² *Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' ²⁸ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." ³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

Our mothers were right: we are judged by the company we keep.

But, like a lot of things in the topsy-turvy world of the gospel, we heard it right and got it wrong. The company Jesus kept, and said we should keep, was hardly what our mothers had in mind.

You and I and the greater Lansing community are keeping company now. About ten years ago, though, it was very different for me. Then my company was a vast agglomeration of diverse cultures, colors, faiths, and lifestyles, with which I sat, stood, walked, rubbed shoulders with, and dodged on sidewalks or expressways every day. It was back when I worked in downtown Chicago, and my daily commute to the Loop by El from Oak Park took about forty minutes each way.

Now I drive in to town, alone with my thoughts or the morning news. In the brief stroll from parking lot to office I usually encounter no one. My coming and going is private, without challenge or noise, and lately I've been thinking about the company I'm not keeping anymore.

Company is an interesting word. *Com* means with and has the sense of sharing, and *panis* is Latin for bread. *Company*, or a *companion*, is the one with whom you share your daily bread. It connotes common need, shared interest, mutual support, interdependence and, above all, welcome. I no longer stand elbow to elbow to my neighbor in a swaying subway car hurtling toward my destination in the bowels of the city. I no longer experience the amazing diversity of races and ages and styles and smells of people on the train, and am now less likely to spend reflective time people-watching and pondering how amazingly different my life is from their

lives...as well as acknowledging, in my better moments, how amazingly alike we all are to one another.

I want to affirm how happy I am to be here with you; I want at the same time, without taking anything from that statement, to say how much my vision of the world was changed being a kind of companion to that mosaic of races, in that collision of life experiences that comprise a wondrous, messy, exciting, all-too-much-to-grasp city. So, if we are judged by the company we keep (and Jesus' judgment is that our company should include those pressed to the margins of power), what kind of companions of Christ are we being?

When I worked in downtown Chicago, I usually spent my lunch hours walking. It led to some fascinating encounters. There was Bongo Man who played a set of calypso drums in the tunnel connecting separate subway lines. His face seemed as though carved out of ebony, on which he continually wore what looked like an eager grin but could have been a maniacal one. Well-thumbed treatises on Jesus would be spread out on a blanket beside him.

Then there was the Asian violinist who entertained the crowds waiting for the trains at the Blue Line Monroe St. stop – Bach and Mozart and Vivaldi competing with the subway's piercing screech. There was the soft-

voiced young man selling *Streetwise*, a newspaper written and sold by homeless persons. And, occupying the same block, there was Sandwich Board Man who day in and day out, in good weather and bad, stood on the street corner ranting against the Soviet Union. The wall had long since fallen; he was, I guess, the last to hear.

On the train home I would hear the buzz of rock and roll from sizzling headphones stuck in the ears of the woman next to me, or I could listen to the debate between University of Illinois medical center staffers being conducted in Dutch, or catch a whiff of the occasional drunk who would stagger on and stagger off the car at the same stop, and be amazed at the non-stop conversation by one woman, who always seemed to catch the same car as I did, recounting every event of her day to a friend, continuing without taking a breath, and without – as far as I could tell – having anything of substance to say.

These were my companions, with whom I had nothing in common and had everything in common. Being with them was a daily reminder of my own insignificance. I am not belittling myself in saying this – only maintaining the perspective that I am one among billions who share a common life, breathe the same air, hunger for love and purpose, each of us complicit in obstructing in some way the love we need to share.

This shoulder-to-shoulder proximity was a wonderful spiritual education for me. The gospel became more lively in my thinking, and it forced me to question my natural reticence and insularity. In the gospel, Jesus redefined who our companions are and what hospitality means. Each of us tends to arrange our lives so as to welcome those who are like us, and avoid – and fear – those who are unlike us. We are companionable within tight social circles but reluctant and guarded outside of them. Jesus insisted that if we don't touch the need of others, then we don't even know our own need. Another way of saying this is if we don't let need touch us, then we are not really letting Jesus touch us, either.

Given this daily diet of diversity, I began to feel called to break out of my private zone and attempt to reach out and touch that which I had been avoiding touching – to personally acknowledge that we're all together in this, that we rock the same way when the train car lurches, that we all suffer from fear, all crave love and acceptance, and all sit at the world's table together. Ours must be a tactile spirituality, a spirituality of presence.

And so one day I found myself passing a young man walking in the same direction as I was walking, and I said hello, and he said hello, and the natural thing happened – a conversation. We were in the area of the city

jail, and I learned that he had just been released, having been gathered up by a sweep of homeless folks the police conduct. He lived, he said, on Lower Wacker Drive, where he hoped he would still be able to find his stuff which he stored in a nook somewhere. I asked him where he ate, how he got along. He told me the places he'd go to find a meal, the society that he and other homeless people tried to create, where he would go every day to get a shower and keep clean, how many places he'd try to find work, and how he ended up on the street in the first place. We parted a few blocks later. I said, "God bless," and he said the same, and I took the subway home to my warm house and my nourishing dinner and my things to do, and he walked into his homeless days and nights, and so we disappeared from each other.

Another time I encountered a man and woman selling *Streetwise*. They buy the newspapers for twenty-five cents each, sell them for a dollar a piece, and reinvest twenty-five cents for the next week's publication. It doesn't earn them much; most people rush on by without buying. When sales were good and they could afford it, they lived in an SRO on South Michigan Ave. where their children waited for them to return by eleven in the morning, the hour that they had to be out of their room for the day. Many nights, when they had not been able to make enough money, they

rode the subway all night. At the end of the line they'd be kicked off, but they'd find a way to get back on and be warm until a new day began.

As I went on my way, the man asked if he could walk to the corner with me. He wanted to tell me about having just been baptized and was hoping that would signal a new beginning for him. He told me about his faith, but I was struck that he never told me about his desperation, and thanked me several times for simply talking to him.

Most times my reticence was more powerful than my conscience and I would walk by saying nothing, giving nothing. I would try not to see, hurried with my business and eager to reach the quiet anonymity and cloistered security of my home. But sooner or later I would receive a nudge to get in touch with the life of the world, beyond my cramped and small version of it, confronting my own insularity and my own prejudices against the poor and my own desire to cling to everything I have in order to keep myself secure and feeling affluent.

Sometimes I would give money, and sometimes I wouldn't, and I never was certain why I did when I did and didn't when I didn't, but I always felt more faithful when I was generous, preferring to err on the side of giving, not hoarding. The common wisdom is that we don't help anyone giving in that fashion, or that we get taken. My experience has taught me

that it is the poor who are being taken.....by me, assuaging my guilty helplessness about a plight I don't know how to fix. I told the man who walked me to the corner telling me of his baptism. "Friend," I said, "I don't know what to tell you; I don't have any answers for you. I wish I did." "I know," he said, shaking my hand. "If there were answers, I wouldn't be here. Maybe my baptism will help," he said. "Thanks for talking to me. Most people just pass by."

My ambivalence, my on-again/off-again notice of those in need is something for which I routinely ask God's forgiveness. What was so startling about Jesus is his utter absence of ambivalence about persons and their need. Nor was he hung up about money. Our society apologizes for its carelessness saying that giving money to people only builds dependence. But we never seem to acknowledge our own neurotic dependence on the countless frivolities and useless gimcracks that our wealth enables us to have, but which rarely gives us more than a few hours' satisfaction. Millions go to bed hungry every night thanks to my desperate need for the petty entertainments I think, in my selfishness, I need or deserve.

We get into petty arguments about the burden of taxes and how government should leave people alone, but that seems to me to simply be

a failure to hear Jesus' call to be companions, to reach out and touch, to give hospitality to those whom society in its disorganized greed tries to ignore. The amount of tax money going to the poor is minuscule compared to the bailouts, the military, the pork projects everyone wants to get rid of unless, of course, it's our pork project.

The vast majority of government financial support goes to people like us in the middle and upper classes in various forms like tax credits for mortgage interest. Many more are suffering now in this economic downturn. Ironically, though, even now the gap between rich and poor in our country – indeed, the world – continues to widen. The poor are growing poorer.

One longs for such clarity of heart as Jesus had who insisted we touch the poor, and that we welcome all to our “tables.” He touched all need, welcomed any castaway, and confronted our platitudinous apologies for privacy and privilege. He understood the need for the moralistically proud to be led out of their splendid isolation, out of their judgmental narrowness, and out of the error that God's love could be distributed on the basis of social class and entitlement. He broke down social structures of class and appalled the “good” people of his day by eating with tax collectors (by definition, collaborators with Rome's confiscatory and corrupt

rule) and with “sinners” (anyone not qualified to worship at the Temple, which included the poor who could not afford an offering, the lame, blind, or ill whose malady was considered prima fascia evidence of God’s disfavor).

It should give us pause to realize, though, that these – not the good, moral, social leaders of the day, but the lame, the halt, the outcast – which helped populate the early church. The poor and outcast, the people with whom we probably would not typically sit down to eat with, were our spiritual ancestors. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Jesus’ image of the Kingdom, those gathered about his table, represent the clientele of a restaurant for rejects; it is dinner at the Castaway Kitchen.

Jesus insists on a tactile spirituality where we touch the poor, the poor touch us, in order that we may be touched by Christ. “Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks,” says one of Shakespeare’s characters. At the root of insularity and aloofness is ingratitude. At the root of exclusion of the poor from our tables of prosperity is beggary of spirit. The church is a company of those who have been touched by the healing hand of Christ. We are brothers and sisters gathered about Christ’s table of welcome – not just the socially acceptable, but the outcast; not just the rich, but the poor; not just those who are like us in some superficial way, but those profoundly

like us in our living a common human life. A tactile spirituality is a compassionate, companionable spirituality. Are we keeping company with Christ? He's the one over there, sitting at the other table with those who rarely dine at our own. The invitations have been sent to join him. An RSVP of faith is requested.