

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Sept. 2, 2007)**

Holy Calculation?

Did you have the same reaction I did when you heard that Gospel passage? It seems at first that Jesus contradicts himself in the two pieces of advice he gives. It's as if Jesus says, "Go" then "Don't go," or "Do this" and then "Don't do this."

Let's start with the second piece of advice. He recommends: "If you prepare a feast, don't invite all kinds of guests who can and will repay you. Don't calculate that way, but invite those who will not be able to give you anything in return. Invite disinterestedly, and your feast will be grand. If you invite only those who are going to invite you, they may perhaps say to one another, 'He only invited us because he wants something in return,' and your feast will be no feast at all. Don't do that. Be wise, be generous, and all will go well."

As I read it I could not help but think of a situation that is all too familiar to us today. People contribute large amounts of money to political candidates because they expect something in return. Or people are appointed to important positions in government or in the diplomatic world because they have supported a particular candidate.

What Jesus is saying here to the people of his own time is revolutionary. He is in fact giving advice that would upset the prevailing customs of his day. I'm sure this could not have been received too well and was probably just another incentive to the religious leaders to want him out of the way.

And of course it's no less revolutionary in our time and calls for a great deal of discernment on our part.

But let's go back and look at that first piece of advice. Here it seems that Jesus does suggest calculation. He says, "If you want to be honored, don't take too high a place at table, because you will be humiliated when the host comes in. Don't even take the place that's yours because then you will not be honored either. Think, calculate, be clever. Take too low a place. Then when the host comes in, he will walk up to you in front of them all,

and he will say, 'Don't sit there, come higher up,' and all the guests will say, 'Look at him, what a noble person! And so humble!'"

Well there must have been something behind all this. There must have been a hidden intention, and I think there is.

When we invite those who cannot repay us, we are inviting the way God invites to the heavenly banquet. After all, who among us can repay God? We are inviting the way Jesus does to the Kingdom. Isn't that also true when we sit down with the poor and the weakest, with the miserable and the wretched, when we take their place, their stand, and their position? Isn't that what Jesus did?

Mind you this doesn't mean that we all have to become Mother Teresa of Calcutta or start handing out everything we have to the poor. It doesn't even mean we have to start soup kitchens or other charitable enterprises. Actually all those things are necessary now because there is something else we perhaps did not do. And that something else Ben Sirach indicates in the first reading: "My son, my daughter, be gentle in carrying out your business and you will be better loved than a lavish giver."

Ben Sirach advises us to carry out our business in the office, in the family, at school, in traffic, in everything, gently. (It reminds me of those signs that greeted you as you went into Maryland: "You are now entering the state of Maryland. Please drive gently.") "Be gentle." That means taking into account the weak, the broken, the poor, the small. We will be loved the better for it, because then the whole world will change and many, if not all, the handouts would no longer be needed.

Everyone, every single widow, orphan, all the marginal people, the weak, the broken, would find their places at the tables of this world. I've read somewhere that society will only heal when it takes the interests of the weak among us first, and the way to measure the greatness of any nation is to see how it cares for its weakest members. Jesus, I am sure, would have approved of those statements.

What both Ben Sirach and Jesus are advocating, of course, is simply the old fashioned virtue of humility, which doesn't seem terribly popular in this fiercely competitive world of ours. The reason for that is because it is perhaps misunderstood. A wise old Jesuit used to tell us when we were young Jesuits: humility means recognizing the truth about yourself,

especially as you stand in relationship to God and to others. Don't be afraid to admit your talents and accomplishments. Accept compliments graciously. But don't ever use those talents or accomplishments to the disadvantage of other people. God gave them to us for service. Humility in a sense means being free. Free of the need to prove that we are better than others. Free to be who and what God wants us to be.