

Krijtberg, August 27, 22nd Sunday through the year. Lk. 14:1.7-14., Sirach 3:17-18,20,28-29

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## TRUE GUEST FRIENDSHIP

Jesus was invited to a meal in the house of a prominent Pharisee. The company at table consisted of other Pharisees and scribes. Jesus noticed that the guests chose the places of honor for themselves. Instead of helping to make the table conversation pleasant, he begins to reprimand first his fellow guests, then the host. To his fellow guests he says: don't look for the best place. And the host is told: don't invite only your friends and your rich neighbors.

### The guests

It is unthinkable that Jesus would want to spoil the meal by acting this way. The story is therefore not so much an account of a historical event in the life of Jesus, as a lesson for those who listen to this gospel. The company that Jesus had joined was made up of pious men who knew exactly how things should be done and who followed the rules exactly. Therefore, they were respected and had authority. They enjoyed their position and desired to be approached with respect. In Matthew, we read Jesus' judgement: *they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others* (23:6-7).

But it was not just the Pharisees who were after the best seats, Jesus' first and closest followers, the apostles, also liked to have the front row seat: even at the last supper they were arguing about who of them was the most important (Lk. 22: 24). Jesus does not only have the Pharisees in mind, but also his own followers.

Jesus addresses the human, all too human, behavior of wanting the best place. He uses a humanly sensible argument: don't look for the best seat right away, because you might have to give up this seat to someone who is more important (important people like to arrive just in the nick of time or simply too late). It is better to sit on a lesser seat. Then you have the chance to be invited to go higher up. This is a clever way of doing things, which has nothing to do with real simplicity or humility. It can be a feigned humility. In fact, it is an ordinary rule of etiquette. With his advice, Jesus stands in the tradition of the sages of Israel. Thus we read in the book of Proverbs (25: 6-7): *Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.*

But Jesus speaks not only as a teacher of human wisdom, but also as a prophet, someone who sees things from God's perspective. Jesus turns a profane, wise rule into a religious lesson. In the parable that he presents to his companions, he drops the word "wedding": *When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor.* The word "wedding" should make us prick up our ears. It refers to the relationship between God and his people, which is often seen as a marriage relationship: God and his people are married to each other. God is the bridegroom, his people the bride

Where God is one party, the other party should not have any false self-esteem. The parable ends with the words: *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* That 'humbling oneself' must be understood as: knowing your place in front of God, standing before Him with open hands, receiving, knowing you are

a guest to whom everything is served and who does not have to pay for it, receiving for free, knowing that God appreciates and respects you.

In our society, the powerful and the rich get the best places. But in the Kingdom of God, other standards prevail; there are no places of honor, because to God everyone is worthy of respect, because everyone is created in God's image.

### **The host**

After the guests, it is the turn of the host. Here too, first, the observation of how things can go in ordinary life: you invite people you like, and people from whom you also expect something for yourself. Here too, it is not only about the host who invited Jesus, but also about current situations in the earliest Christian community. The host who only invites important people, people of his own kind, reminds us of the meetings James writes about the richly clothed man is given a place of honor, while the poor man is allowed to sit on the floor (James 2:3). Saint Paul writes about meals of Christians where some are so poor that they are hungry and others so rich that they are drunk (1 Cor. 11:21).

Now it is not at all wrong to invite your friends. And of course, there is reciprocity, giving and receiving. That is part of friendship. But Jesus wants to emphasize here the dimension of giving. It has to be a real giving, not a calculating hospitality, not a *do ut des*. In the latter case, you are in a circle that you can't get out of. Something new only happens when you widen the circle with people to whom you can really give, without getting anything in return, at least not in terms of *do ut des*. Only then does hospitality take on a new, divine dimension. Not rich neighbors, says the Gospel, but poor, deficient, lame and blind people.

There is a connection between what Jesus says about the guests and what he says about the host. We are called to unite the two within us: guest and host. We are guests when we receive from the hand of God. We are hosts when we give, not in payment, but free of charge. We can do this because we ourselves have received for nothing. The one is connected with the other. He who knows that he should stand before God with open and receiving hands, also knows how he should stand before others: with open, giving hands.