

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
September 1, 2019 – 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 14:7-14

Luke's gospel is filled with meals. It's said he was a physician, but maybe he was a chef on the side. In his gospel there are at least ten stories of Jesus eating with others. But, as today's gospel suggests, meals (especially those involving guests) were not just about satisfying hungry appetites. They were also about creating or recognizing social standing.

Jesus warns about taking a place at the table above your social position. If that's recognized by the host, he will likely tell you to take a less-esteemed position, like the seat right next to the noisy kitchen. In that sense, Jesus was simply offering what might seem to be common sense advice. So why is this story included in the gospel? Is there a deeper truth being offered to us?

I think it might have to do with how God rates us. We might wonder whether God has favorites, a first, a second, a third and so forth. We know that secular society rates people all the time. It positions people according to all sorts of things: background, education, accomplishments, financial holdings, appearance. Even religious affiliation. Lots of calculations are being processed about all of us. That's the way the world works.

But, again, what about God? Does God rate us or have favorites? Let me answer this by telling you about someone I feel is almost as bright as God, namely my Mom. I come from a family where I was the oldest. I had three younger sisters. When I was growing up, for all kinds of irrational and stupid reasons, I felt I was better than my sisters. So, I falsely thought that I should be privileged in certain matters. Like I should get the largest piece of pie or first choice as to where I would sit in our family car. After all. I was the first born and I was a boy! I was quite unenlightened at that time.

Some nights my mom would make a dessert for us kids. One of my favorites was chocolate pudding. So, she set out four bowls on the kitchen counter to be filled for us. But here's where mom showed her maternal brilliance. The rule was that the one in charge of filling the bowls (we took turns) was last to pick a bowl. Thus, the measured-out of portions were absolutely equal! Not a molecule of difference between the four bowls.

And that's the way it is with God. No favored seats at the table. No one was loved any more than any others. Everyone is loved equally. That's about as countercultural as one can imagine. That's quite a challenge for us in a world seemingly intent on creating inequality.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
September 8, 2019 – 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 14:25-33

If you have been reading my gospel reflections for a while, you know that I believe that I view family life as very important. There are times when the needs of my family come first. For example, I pass on buying that new shirt, which I really want, because one of our children needs something more pressing. And I believe this valuing of family life is totally in line with my role as a follower of Jesus.

Thus, when I read the words in today's gospel about *hating one's family*, I was perplexed. Was Jesus serious about this? Is not Jesus *pro-family*? Shouldn't social obligations within one's family be first on the list of "things that must be done?" Doesn't family come first?

What was Jesus thinking? A knowledge of history might help. In his time, people were not so much viewed as individuals, but more as members of groups. Family connection was all-important. Thus, Jesus was occasionally addressed as "Son of David" or people thought of him simply as "the carpenter's son."

But Jesus said there was another way to calculate personal importance. It involved seeing oneself as a child of God. In other words, family identity, even one that included a famous parent or ancestor, should not be the absolute center of our lives. What's makes each of us important and should set the tone for our lives should be God's relationship to us and our decision to be, first of all, one of God's beloved disciples.

Further, in today's gospel Jesus notes that being a true Christian does not make our life easier. It is not intended as a life of privilege or without pain. Those of us who are followers of Jesus accept the fact that we are to take up our cross daily and follow the way of Jesus. This path of life can be uphill and quite rough at times. But we also need to remember the words of Jesus that this burden is never too much for us. We will never be asked to do something that is beyond our strength.

Back to family life. Often the demands of discipleship will involve our family relationships. Family often gives us our nearest neighbour. Love of neighbour and God are number one in our Christian life. But we respond to those needs not so much because they are family obligations, but because at a deeper level, they are part of our Christian calling.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
September 15th, 2019 – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 15:1-32

We all have had the experience of losing things, like keys or a wallet or even a child in a crowded mall. Or having that feeling of being lost in an unfamiliar place. Where I live in the open spaces of Montana, it is not unusual to go for a hike in the woods and suddenly finding oneself "lost." In today's gospel, we read about three instances of being lost. There is the story of a lost sheep who was suddenly missing from a large herd. There is the story of a woman who had ten coins and lost one of them. And finally, there is the memorable story of the lost son who left his family, took his share of the family's wealth and selfishly squandered it.

But if we really think about these stories, we realize that these are not narratives about being lost, but rather about *being found*. The good shepherd temporarily leaves his large flock of sheep and finds the lost one. The woman cleans her whole house and eventually finds that lost coin. And the irresponsible son eventually returns to his family and his father arranges a celebration in his honor because his lost son is now found.

All of these stories are really about God who pursues us even when we have lost our way. Perhaps you have read the classic poem by Francis Thompson called "The Hound of Heaven." Written more than one-hundred years ago, the poem describes God as like a relentless hunting dog, constantly pursuing us, no matter where we go or what we do. That's what God does. That's who God is: a seeker of the lost.

Is that how we imagine God? Someone who is always looking for us, seeking to find us, no matter where we are? When I was a youngster, I was taught that God was always looking for me, especially watching me when I did something bad. As I recall this now, I must admit that I was not exactly comforted by knowing that God was always close by. Like those security cameras that seem everywhere, divine surveillance was always watching me.

Obviously, that's not the point of these gospel stories of God's presence. God wants us close because God loves each and every one of us. God wants to walk with us through all the good times and the not-so-good times of our life. God wants to be there especially when we are troubled with worries about members of our families who may be facing challenges or friends who have fallen on hard times. God is especially close to us when we are personally facing difficulties in relationships, with matters of financial survival or when we are anxious over health issues, or just the challenges of each day. In a sense, we are never lost because God relentlessly is with us no matter what.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
September 22nd, 2019 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 16:1-13

Today's gospel is about people who had to change their lives because of new circumstances. We learn about a fellow who was given a pink slip by his employer, but before he cleaned out his desk, he made some deals with people who owned his master (the boss) some money. Since he still had the key to the employee's bathroom, he still had some clout so he decided he would befriend those who owned money to his company, so he lowered their debt. He might need them later. He wanted to make the best of the change he was about to experience, namely unemployment.

While I would not advise doing what this so-called wise steward did, I have to admire his desire to make the best out of his new situation. He wasn't going to move ahead by just sitting around. He looked in the mirror, admitted to what was ahead and made the appropriate moves to survive. For him, times were changing.

Jesus used this story to remind his followers, then and now, that each new day brings on new possibilities. The wise person does not live in the past, but more in the present and the future. We might call this approach "Christian realism."

To be personal for a bit, for many decades I lived a very full life as a husband and parent, a teacher and writer and I travelled the world giving presentations mostly to church people about the spiritual richness of ordinary family life. For more than four decades I was fully active in all these roles. But then the circumstances of my life changed. Children left home to pursue new opportunities, I retired (mostly) from teaching and I no longer accumulated air miles giving presentations here and there. I still do some of those things but not nearly as much as I used to. For me circumstances changed.

So, I had to change and adjust. And it was not always easy. While there are benefits to aging (always ask for the senior discount), the satisfactions derived from a more active life and sometimes exciting work are now mostly in my past. Things that once gave me the feeling of being needed and valued are more memories than present day experiences. I now must seek God's presence more in short walks, quiet evenings and writing this "Nazareth Page" which you are now reading. I am trying to adjust to new circumstances. That's something we all are invited to do by God. Finding a new world filled with God's presence and grace is still possible, but it might not be easy to do so.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
September 29th, 2019 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 16:19-31

Years ago, I heard a very interesting play on words. Maybe you too are familiar with it. It goes like this. "Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Perhaps these words came to the mind of a poetic person after reading today's gospel about the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus. One was described as quite comfortable in this life and one was very afflicted. They both died as we all do. And you know the rest of the gospel story. Once you hear it (even as a child), you don't forget it.

Also of interest is the gospel's conclusion. The rich man thought that if his rich friends knew what God expects them to do during their lives on earth, and additionally, if they knew that divine judgment awaits them after death, they might change their ways. They would share their wealth with the poor. Or maybe they wouldn't. The gospel implies the latter response.

This gospel is one of the foundation stones for the Catholic Church's social teachings. Popes for the last hundred years have been pointing to the needs of the poor and the duty of those more well-off to share their wealth with the poor. Some, of course, do this with a generous heart and helping hands. Many don't.

A few words about Catholic social responsibility. It is based on the teachings of Jesus and the long tradition of the church. It is rooted in the belief that all creation, including your life and mine, is a gift from God. Ultimately, everything created belongs to God.

During our lives on Earth we are offered what we need to live with the dignity of human persons. For all kinds of reasons some people are more fortunate than others. So, as a matter of justice, those who have more are called to share their excess with those who do not have enough to survive.

We are called to share not only financial resources, but also provide educational and health assistance, or any kind of help, wherever this is needed. We can share our time and words with the lonely and provide places of dignity for those who have no place to lay their head. Or offer a kind word and help to those who are faceless and forgotten in society. As St. Paul says: Those who have received much, much will be expected. The great example of social justice is the story of the Good Samaritan. He stopped to help a stranger in distress, a person in clear need. He did so because he had a generous heart. Just like God.

David M. Thomas, PhD