

CALLED TO BE THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

12th Sunday After Pentecost

There are several banquet parables in the scriptures. And, as best I can this morning, I'd like to tell you a story that I think gets to the heart of them all. It's a simple story, so simple that if you think about it too much, you can miss the point. So just sit back and relax. It's story time.

Imagine a banquet hall. The party has not yet begun. No guests have arrived. And you are getting a "sneak preview" of the facility. It is an enormous space. But, as far as furniture, there is only one -- very, very long -- table. And, around the long table, are many, many chairs -- countless chairs!

At the **far** end -- the head -- of the table, there is only one, very tall, thick and heavy chair. It is the most elegant of all -- beautifully carved and gilded with gold.

While, at the **near** end -- the foot -- of the table, there are only several short, cheaply-fashioned stools. Unadorned. And they look quite rough and rickety.

And as you scan through all of the chairs, between the "foot" and the "head", you notice that, as they get closer to the head of the table, the **size** and **quality** and **elegance** of the chairs gets better and better. For example, a bit away from the "foot" of the table, the stools are more soundly built and, further away still, they are taller and have proper "backs" added to them. And as you get closer to the middle of the table, the chairs are nicely sanded and have a few little carvings in their wood. At the middle, they are taller still and have nice coats of paint on them. And, then, in the "upper middle" section, the carvings on the chairs start to get much more ornate, and the painting is done with finer detail, in many colours. And, as you get even closer to the "head" of the table, the chairs get even taller and wider, and the seats are upholstered with soft, colourful cushions, until you finally reach the tallest, grandest, most beautiful and "cushy" chair of all, at the very head of the table.

And, then, as you turn away from the great table and its many chairs, you notice one last thing.

At the very back of the room, well past the "foot" of the table, there is a small, kind of "shabby" section. And in it, there is nothing at all. Not even a carpet, only the dirt floor. And as you get closer, you notice that on the floor there are many bare footprints, pointing in all directions, and crowded in tightly together. And you realize that this must be the "standing room only" section.

It is all very curious. And as you are standing there on the dirt floor, taking in the entire hall, you suddenly become aware... that you are not alone.

Way in the back of the shabby section, a young man is standing. In his thirties, simply dressed, nothing special. He is just silently standing there.

And then, your eyes meet. He says nothing, but somehow you know that he is both very gentle and very strong. And as you look more closely, something happens. You have a kind of certainty that he is **loving**, in the deepest sense -- full of grace. **So full** that his grace is somehow overflowing into you.

And you realize that he **recognizes** you -- *not that you have ever met before; this is the first time you've ever laid eyes on him*. But he **recognizes** you in a deeper way. All at once, he recognizes your **worth**, your **dignity**, your **beauty**, your **frustrations**, your **flaws**. And he **accepts** you, all of you, and only desires your happiness.

In that moment, you realize that **you** also recognize **him**. Again, not that you have ever met him before... but you recognize him as **one you have always longed to meet**. One who has always been in your mind, whom you have always loved, and desired to be with, and to become like. It is like you are falling in love. You feel utterly free and new. And yet, it is not "romantic" or "unsettling," as crushes can be. It is very **clear**, and **peaceful**, and somehow **wise**, in a way that you cannot fully understand.

And then, he speaks to you.

He says: "**You are not alone. We all need to be recognized. Recognized like this -- for who we truly are. It's what enables us to grow in love.**"

And then he says:

"In a moment, this banquet hall will be filled with people. Each of them, in their hearts, is coming here for the very same reason you have. Each of them is longing to be recognized, in the way that I have recognized you and you have recognized me. But very few of them are aware of this longing, because... they've come under a kind of "spell."

"It happens like this:

"The king will be sitting at the head of the table in his magnificent chair. And quickly he notices someone in the room who is **burning** with envy toward him. This envious one longs to have what the king has. He would even **kill** the king to have what he has, and so become the king himself.

"Now the king knows that he is deeply envied by this one, and the king **delights** in it -- it makes him feel even more lofty and special. But he doesn't want this fellow's envy to get out of hand, and, lose his throne over it. So the king does something very clever.

"He offers the envious one a **very nice chair**, close to the head of the table. The chair is not as nice as the king's, of course, but it is **much** nicer than all the chairs that come before it. And the envious one is **delighted** -- his hatred of the king is appeased -- (*for although he is not himself the king, at least with this grand chair of his own, he is much more "like" the king, and that will have its benefits.*) He realizes, of course, that he now **"owes"** the king, but he believes that having this chair will be well worth it. So he goes around, proudly pointing to his chair, and telling everyone who will listen, "*The king has recognized how truly noble I am (compared to the rest of you)! Look what he gave me!*"

"And, just then, he notices that some of the crowd are becoming very envious of **him** -- grimacing, and giving him the "evil eye." But, like the king, he **thoroughly enjoys** their envy -- it makes him feel even more special and "above the fray." At the same time, though, it worries him, because... *what if they become **so envious** that they want to **kill him** to get his chair?* So, he too, does something very clever.

"He approaches these envious ones and *"most graciously"* offers them all nice seats **at the middle** of the table. These seats are not as nice as his, of course, but they are much nicer than those at the **"lower middle"** section of the table. And they are **delighted!** Their hatred of the nobler man is appeased -- for now **they too** will be envied and feel very special. And although they now **"owe"** the nobler man who gave them their seats, they believe the chairs are worth it.

Jesus pauses for a moment. Just looking at you. And then he says:

"I know this is a lot to take in, but, do you see what's happening to these people? It's like they come under a spell. They become enchanted. So that they **feel** deeply recognized, while -- in truth -- they're not being recognized at all. It's just a party game.

"But on and on it goes. The spell is highly contagious. It spreads like wildfire, all the way down to the very "foot" of the table, until every last seat is taken.

"And then....., what happens to the people left standing??? No one offers them a seat. For to do that, they would have to give up their own. And, besides, the ones left standing are always very **unenviable** -- the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. People it would be pointless to have in your debt, for they possess nothing that you want. And so, **for those under the spell**, there is no incentive to offer them a seat at the table.

"And that is basically how it works. Soon the crowd will enter, and you will see what I mean. They will start scrambling for the best seats until only the most vulnerable are left standing. Listen, I hear them coming..."

And Jesus stops speaking. But, at this point, you just have to ask, "**So... what exactly are we hoping to do here???**"

He replies:

"We can't get **too** ambitious. This is how the world works. It's like one big party where many of the guests have come under a powerful spell. They're not bad people; they're just enchanted. The spell can be broken, but it's not easy.

"What I usually do is just stand here, in the back, with the ones who are not being recognized at all. And, one by one, I recognize them as they truly are in the eyes of God. And some of them start to recognize me, just as you did. And we start getting to know one other. Love starts to spread. Community starts to form between us. Back here is where the **real** life of the party is.

"And gradually, a few people out there at the big table start to notice that the mood is very different back here. They can feel our joy. They can see and hear that we are recognizing one another as the children of God we truly are. Most just scoff and continue playing their party game. But, for some, when they see what is happening among us, **it breaks the spell they're under**. If only for a moment, **it awakens their need for love and takes away their desire for false recognition**. Sometimes, a few of them leave their seats and come back here to join us. (Not many, but a few.) Some others wait till nightfall, when the party is over, and come find us in the streets to talk.

And, gradually, our group of friends grows. People of all kinds, from the very poor to the very highly seated. People who are disenchanting with the game, who want to be free of its spell, and be recognized as they truly are. We get together often, and everyone has a seat at our table. We learn together and we grow in love for God and one another. But we don't just keep to ourselves. We live in the world; we love the world; we're part of it. And it needs us. To be the life of the party.

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