

PROPER 17 C

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Moving Up Lower

***“On a Sabbath, Jesus went to dine at the House
of one of the leading Pharisees,
and the people there were watching him closely.”***

In Luke's original Greek, ***“watching him closely.”*** has the same meaning
as Obama observing Hillary Clinton carefully
or Trump observing Karmela carefully.

They were not observing to pick up pointers. They were watching carefully
for their opponents to trip themselves up.

Some politically incorrect slip of the tongue, some gaffe,
some slight contradiction.

And then they would pounce.

That's the ***“watching carefully.”*** of the Gospel. The irony, of course,
was that, at the same time, Jesus was watching them carefully.

What he saw was the usual social climbing and jockeying for position.

That's normal human pride at work, and it's something to be dealt with,
and so, on this level, Jesus offers some practical wisdom
which adds up to, ***“Don't embarrass yourself.”***

Don't sit at the table

***only to be publicly escorted to the main dining room
when the guest of honor arrives.***

Don't be like the latecomer at a wedding who sits in the empty seat

in the front pew, the one reserved for the bride's mother.

Don't rush into the taxi waiting to pick up a celebrity.

And don't park in the father's spot!"

That's everyday etiquette advice to soften up his audience.

Then Jesus hits them with the real point:

Don't always invite your in-group against whom
you are always measuring yourself but measure yourself
against the less fortunate, that is, let your heart, your charity,
and your compassion moves beyond the people
who can pay you back.

Jesus says in effect, ***"Be like your heavenly Father
who sends rain on the just and unjust alike
and invite the least of your brethren, those who have no voice,
those who never receive an invitation
and from whom nothing can be expected."***

A strong gospel point,

So let me give you an example of how it's done.

I'll tell you about a man who heroically extended
a lifelong invitation to those with absolutely nothing to offer.

His name is Peter Claver, a 17th century Spaniard,
whose feast is on September 9th. ***His*** invitees were slaves.

For over a thousand years, slavery, long an institution,

had died out over time, slavery in Europe at least.

By the 12th century, it was virtually unknown.

But then, dramatically, in the 15th century,

European exploration and exploitation of Africa, Asia, and the Americas
revived the slave trade with a vengeance.

The Portuguese explorers who followed the coast of Africa
in search of new trade routes to Asia

saw money-making opportunities everywhere they went.

With their superior weapons, it was easy to conquer the local people,
and it was a short step from subduing a population to enslaving them.

As one of the first new lands colonized by the Portuguese,
the Canary Islands became the first place
where slavery was reintroduced.

But when word of the situation reached Pope Eugenius the 4th in 1435,
he fired off a letter to the local Bishop denouncing
the enslavement of the Canary Islanders
and demanding that they be set free.

His plea fell on deaf ears as the Portuguese and then the Spanish
pushed farther and farther into fabulously wealthy unknown lands
and the temptation to exploit the riches of these territories
through the slave labor of the local population became irreversible.

Besides, the exploiters urged, those American Indians, Africans, and Asians
were clearly less than human, quite inferior, brutish, primitive beings.

Pope Paul the Third fired back with a 1537 document that asserted

that ***“the Indians themselves indeed are true men”***
and that ***“no one in any way***
may presume to reduce the Indians to slavery.”

Forget the Pope.

In spite of papal condemnations, greed won out
and the international slave trade flourished
among Catholics and Protestants for another 400 years.
And often, by the way, with the cooperation of the native blacks
who grew rich by rounding up and selling their fellow citizens.

In the midst of all this, a son, Peter, was born to the Clavers,
a farming family who worked the land
in the Providence of Catalonia in Spain.

He was a bright, religious lad, but like Hamlet, he found it very hard
ever to make a decision and to stick with it.

His parents eventually sent Peter to a school
run by the Jesuits in Barcelona.

At that time, the Jesuits were still
a relatively new religious order in the church.

They soon became not only renowned teachers
and shock troops against the Protestant Reformation.

But famous as missionaries and convert makers as well.

Such an active, exciting, varied life appealed to Peter.

He talked a lot about joining but could never quite commit himself.

Finally, after vacillating for several years, Peter Claver asked to be received as a Jesuit novice.

But, typical Peter, he had barely entered the novitiate when he began once more to second-guess himself.

What if he was not cut out for an active life as a missionary or parish priest? Maybe this, maybe that. He drove everyone crazy.

Fortunately, help was nearby in the person of a college doorkeeper, a seventy-two-year-old lay brother named Alfonsus Rodriguez.

Brother Alphonsus had had a family and a career, but after his wife and children all died, he gave up his business and entered the religious life.

Although he was a Jesuit brother now, he hadn't lost his ability, cultivated over many years as a businessman, to judge character.

Nor did he lose his knack for handling a customer who couldn't decide what he wanted.

So it was Brother Alphonsus who assured Peter that he did indeed belong with the Jesuits and, moreover, that Peter should ask his superiors to send him to the Americas as a missionary.

Peter was stunned. But Brother Alphonsus insisted that the way to overcome fear and indecision is to make a bold move.

So Peter summoned up his courage and asked his superiors

to assign him to the American mission. They gave their consent and sent him to Cartagena, Columbia, as an ordained novice.

Now Cartagena's location on the Caribbean Sea

made it one of the principal ports for the slave trade in the New World:

12,000 enslaved Africans were unloaded in Cartagena every year.

You can imagine that, after weeks crammed together in the dark holds of the slave ships, these tragic people were filthy, weak from hunger and dehydration, and half mad with fear.

Many were sick. Some were dying. Yet, whatever their condition, all were driven like cattle into holding pens near the dock to be sorted out and sold later.

The only white man who treated the Africans kindly was a Jesuit Priest.

Father Alphonsus de Sandoval.

When he heard the roar of the harbor cannon

that signaled the arrival of another slave ship, Father de Sandoval

gathered up food, water, and medicine and hurried down to the harbor.

The comforts Father de Sandoval could offer the Africans were meager, yet he cared for his ***“parishioners,”*** as he called them,

day after day until they had all been sold off and the pen was empty.

When Peter Claver, the apprehensive new Jesuit recruit from Spain, arrived in Cartagena, Father de Sandoval made him his assistant.

At first glance it would appear that the priest had made a terrible mistake.

Yet this turned out to be the turning point for Peter.

The work in the slave pen transformed him,
this well-off, middle-class young man.

Once he recognized that he could do something
for God and his fellow man,
all doubts, all qualms, all uncertainties vanished.

He asked his superiors in Cartagena to ordain him and to permit him
to serve the slaves. A Saint-in-the-making had been born.

He would spend the rest of his life inviting to the Lord's banquet
the poor, the crippled, the blind – those who could never repay.

Every time a slaver sailed into Cartagena's harbor,
Peter took the pilot's boat out to the ship
and began his work at once down in the hold.

On shore, as the sailors and soldiers herded the slaves into the pens,
Peter went with them.

Over the years, he built up a team of interpreters
who could speak the languages of. Guinea, the Congo, and Angola,
the lands from which most of these captives came.

Through his interpreters, Peter tried to comfort the Africans
and learn what they needed.

Every day, Peter and his interpreters returned with more food, more water,
more medicines, and as he treated the Africans, he explained to them
the basics of the Christian faith.

It is said that during the forty-four years Father Claver served
in the slave pens, He baptized over 100,000 Africans.

Whatever the number of converts may have been, Peter regarded them as his parishioners. He kept up a steady round of visitations, saying Mass for his converts, bringing them the sacraments, and continuing their religious instruction

No surprise, Peter Calver's devotion to his African converts enraged the white population of Cartagena.

The charges: He was keeping slaves from their work.

He was contaminating churches and chapels with his congregation of unwashed Africans.

He was profaning the Blessed Sacrament

by giving communion to these ***"animals."***

Some well-born ladies even refused to enter a church if Father Claver had said mass there for slaves.

Even some of Peter's brother Jesuits thought he was excessively devoted to the Africans.

No matter.

After years of wavering, Peter Claver had found his vocation, and he would not be deterred from it.

Peter kept up his exhausting routine until one day, when he was seventy-four years old, he collapsed in the slave pen.

Back at the Jesuit residence, he lay on his deathbed, abandoned by the white Christians of Cartagena.

The only one who tried to nurse the dying man was an African servant.

The end came quickly. Late in the evening of September 7, 1654,
Peter Claver received the last sacraments, then fell unconscious and died.
Shortly after midnight.

A crowd of slaves broke down the gates of the Jesuit residence.
So they could see their saint one last time.

On January 15th, 1888, the people of Rome
witnessed a double canonization as Pope Leo the 13th
declared that Peter Claver and Alfonsus Rodriguez,
banquet throwers for the poor were Saints.
And that, my fellow parishioners, is the Gospel of the Lord. Amen.