

Sunday, September 1, 2019 – St James

This morning I am going to talk to you about 'Humility' and 'Hospitality'.

Speaking of humility, I want to tell you about a radio programme I once heard on CBC Radio's Maritime Noon, a phone in show. On that day the topic was 'Good Relationships'. The program's guest was Adam Galovan, from the University of Alberta's Dept of Human Ecology. He co-authored a study on relationships and was surprised by the findings. Humility emerged as the strongest predictor of successful relationships. They found that humble people are more likely to listen to others - a key factor. A humble person will pay attention to the spouse and focus on them. Humility they defined as willingness to listen to someone else; listening to truly understand, not only to respond.

Until now, communication skills were thought by the professionals to be the key to good relationships. So discovering the importance of humility is new... The study also showed that compassion is important. Compassion is trying to help the other, considering the other's well-being; seeing the other's point of view. We are sometimes quick to label. A great example is when driving...How many of us have ever exclaimed 'He or she is an idiot!' Sometimes we have a consumer attitude to relationships, interested mainly in what we are getting out of them. In today's Gospel, we see Jesus eating at the home of a prominent Pharisee and noticing how the guests behave. They seek out the best places at the table - the seats near their host, where they will be served first and receive the best portions.

And Jesus speaks about this saying

"... do not take the place of honour,....But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus is talking about humility here.

Being humble means we realize it is up to our host God, where he will seat us and evaluate our worth.

Being humble means, we trust that every seat at the table is a good seat, a seat that allows us to receive what God promises to all who respond to his invitation to come to him.

C. S. Lewis, the writer of the childrens' books 'The Tales of Narnia' had this definition of humility:

Humility is not thinking less of yourself.

It is thinking of yourself less."

Alcoholics Anonymous uses this as well. Let me repeat that:

Humility is not thinking less of yourself.

It is thinking of yourself less."

This is the kind of humility Jesus is pointing to today:

thinking of ourselves less and about others more.

Isn't this the same humility which is so important for good relationships as found in the study I mentioned earlier?

Historians tell this tale about the funeral of Charlemagne.

Charlemagne was the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages.

After his death, a tremendous funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral. When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the bishop, who barred the cathedral door.

"Who comes?" the Bishop asked, as was the custom.

"Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," proclaimed the Emperor's proud herald.

"Him I know not," the Bishop replied. "Who comes?"

The herald, a bit shaken, replied,

"Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth."

"Him I know not," the Bishop said again. "Who comes?"

The herald, now completely crushed, responded,

"Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ,"

-- to which the Bishop responded, "Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

The point, is that in God's eyes, we're all equally needy.

Charlemagne, Mother Teresa, you and me. None of us will ever be "good enough" to expect that we are entitled to God's love and forgiveness.

Each of us is a sinner in need of redemption, each of us flawed.

Today's Gospel is about hospitality as well as humility.

Jesus tells his host he should not invite friends, relatives nor rich neighbours, those capable of inviting him back and repaying him. But instead Jesus says invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; in that is a special blessing. Although these guests cannot repay him, he will be repaid at the 'resurrection of the righteous'.

Jesus' hospitality is a radical hospitality which includes the least likely people.

When we take care of people in need, God's kingdom breaks into our lives. We are told when we do this, it is as if we do it for Christ himself.

Roy Fairchild wrote a book entitled 'Finding Hope Again - A pastor's guide to counseling depressed persons'. In that book, he tells this story about hospitality: here is what he wrote:

"I had come to Vienna after a two-week illness in a little Austrian village. I had spent most of my travel money on medicine and doctors and used my last bit to take a train to Vienna. I had no clue where to find my friends who had been waiting for me earlier. I was lost and hungry and depressed.

"As I was standing in one of the street car stations in the center of the city, tired, discouraged, and trying to figure out what to do, a little, old wrinkled woman (whose job it was to sweep out the station) came over to me and asked if I was hungry. Even before I could answer, she took her lunch from a brown bag and offered me half. I was moved. She not only helped my aching hunger, but lifted my spirit in an unforgettable way. I have never forgotten her -- the warmth of her face, the graciousness of her gift, the youthful sparkle in her eyes.

he goes on to write

"We talked for more than an hour about her life. It had not been easy. She was raised in the country, knowing nothing but hard work on a farm. She had lost her husband and two sons in the Resistance. Only her daughter had survived. She was thankful, she said, for many things. She was at peace with her story.

"Finally, I asked her why she offered me her lunch. She said simply, Jesus is my Lord, God is good. She understood and lived the story of Jesus in a way that the most sophisticated scholars could never do. Her faith touched mine."

In our lesson from Hebrews this morning we heard:

2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

And then Fairchild asked this question:

"Who was it, after all, that I met that day in Vienna?"

He doesn't give us the answer to that question, but the answer is clear. He met Christ. He met Christ in the presence of a woman who was very ordinary -- but who was part of the kingdom of God. Her invitation to share, her hospitality blessed him, but it also blessed her.

Jesus promised that such hospitality will be repaid "at the resurrection of the righteous" -- but it seems God's blessing also begins here and now.

Our Saviour Jesus Christ gives us life in its fullness. Who will we invite to share that fullness?

I pray God meets your every need this morning. And I am sure that you pray for the needs of those seated next to you and for those in your heart.

Let us also pray for those who are not here today

That those outside this place may enter in.

Are we inviting people?

Do we speak inviting words?

Do we pay attention to people?

Especially people who are on the fringes?

Those people who have nothing to offer us in return?

Do you want God to shower them with grace?

Why not invite them in? Let them show up on your radar. Pay attention...Take time to smile and chat to people whom you encounter in stores, and gas stations. Spread a bit of hospitality around, even if it's just your attention for a few moments. God has invited you in - so be God's representative and invite them in.

We have lots of room - will you allow God to issue an invitation through you to someone, who like you, is in need.

We do not have to think less of ourselves

- we are, after all, part of the family of God

- Christ has given his life for each of us.

Rather than think less of ourselves

We need to think of ourselves less.

Remember the rest of the family and pray that God will use you and that God will use me to invite others to come in and sit down and be part of the family. Amen.