

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time; C

Nobody wants to be nobody. Everybody wants to be somebody. That is one of the fundamental facts about human nature. We all have a deep, almost desperate, need to know that we are important. Today's gospel reading deals with this very topic. Jesus had been invited to a dinner party in the home of one of the leading Pharisees. It wasn't one of those fun dinner parties, where friends get together just to have a good time and enjoy each others company. This was one of those pseudo-sophisticated affairs where self-important people get together and spend the evening trying to impress each other.

You know the type thing I am talking about, where you drop the names of important people and places. "The last time I was in Paris" or "I had lunch the other day with Senator So-and-so." Well, Jesus was a little amused by all of this. He watched the people falling over themselves and climbing over each other in a desperate attempt to make a good impression. Then when they were seated for dinner, he told a story about a wedding where a man walked in and took the most honored seat in the house. Then a little later a guest of greater importance arrived, and the first man was asked to give up his place to the second man. And Jesus explained that the best way to avoid that humiliation is to start at the foot of the table, and stay there unless the host moves you to a higher place. At the

end of the story, he laid down this great principle of life: “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” Then he gave this suggestion to his host: The next time you give a party, do not invite this same old crowd. You guys are just swapping invitations. That’s all you are doing; and it long since stopped to be fun, if ever was. Next time, do something different. Invite some people who cannot possibly return the favor. Give a dinner for the beggars, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Now what was Jesus saying? What was he telling them and us? Well, first, be it known that he did not object to the desire to be important. To the contrary, he spent much of his ministry teaching timid and frightened people how important they really were. His message was not about human littleness but human greatness. Sometimes we may put people down, but he never did. His effort was always to lift them up. Parents, and teachers, and business executives, and all people in places of authority could learn from his method. He understood more about human growth than we know today. He knew that if people had a high opinion of themselves, they would do their best to live up to it. So always his message was the same: People are the most important thing in the world. The soul of one man is worth more than the material universe and everything that is in it. You and I need to keep that in

mind. Jesus applauds, approves, and encourages our every desire to be truly important.

What he does not approve is our childish efforts at self-promotion. His advice about taking the lowest place and waiting for a promotion makes a lot of good sense. Our attempts to look important are not so much wrong as ineffective. They just do not work, and the reason is everyone can see right through them. The end result is that we only succeed in making ourselves look silly. Forget about trying to be a big shot. Just decide who you are and then be that person with your whole heart. That is all the importance any of us really need.

Finally, consider the advice Jesus gave his host about a different kind of party. Now, he wasn't suggesting that we should not have dinner with and for our friends. He was simply saying that we should enlarge our scope and become aware of some other people. We might call them "little people," though I doubt he would approve of that term. No one was little in his eyes. They were just sons and daughters of God who happened to be in need. And if you really want to be important, turn your attention to those people, and show that they are important to you. I have known a few people who others regard as the greatest person in the world. Probably, you know someone like that too. Their secret is really not hard to discover. They have a way of making you feel like the

most important person on earth. They call you by name. When you talk to them, they look you straight in the eye. They are fully interested in you, in your children, and in your work. They care about you and find ways to let you know it. It's no wonder that you and others regard that person as great. There aren't enough people like that in our world. Why don't you become one of them?