

“Friendly Love”

*Instant coffee, instant tea; life is lived so instantly,
But the kind of food I need for myself,
Can't be found on a grocery shelf...*

These opening lines from an insightful poem express a truth we ought to contemplate, because life's most precious gifts don't come instantly. The virtues of love, faith, character, integrity, loyalty, understanding, wisdom, and others ... do not come to us overnight. Such virtues are like diamonds from coal; they take a good deal of time. Unfortunately, we are a terribly impatient people. Our self-gratifying attitude in this consumer society of ours has spoiled us to the point of wanting everything and wanting it yesterday.

The gospel lesson from Luke is one we need to hear and hear often! It is a lesson we need to teach our children ... that the good things in life come over a long period of time ... that there are few immediate rewards ... that the real payoffs in life come with a lot of sweat and toil, much anxiety and frustration, and with faith and hope ... IF ... they come to us at all! This is certainly true regarding our faith. People tend to believe and pray more during a time of crisis, so that “something” might happen right away. It is as if faith is something instant, or no more than wishful thinking. True faith comes gradually over many years of life experiences while practicing the discipline of faith. Faith is not something we can turn on and off, and gain instant satisfaction. Faith is like a “diamond from coal.” Faith grows during a lifetime of seeking and practicing those things that cultivate the seed of faith.

Billy Graham tells about a time he was on a plane and a man sitting immediately in front of him had been drinking to excess. The man became rather loud and abusive. Finally, the flight attendant said to the obnoxious man, “Sir, do you know that Billy Graham is sitting right behind you?” The man turned around and said, “I'm glad to meet you. I went to one of your crusades and it changed my life!” Graham didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A religious conversion does not promise instant sainthood ... it is, though, a change in the right direction. The fruits of conversion and commitment to Jesus Christ come gradually and over a life time.

Things that are handed to us or come easy are seldom thought of, and most likely are not appreciated. The things we cherish the most are the things for which we labored long and hard. True appreciation comes from obtaining what seemed impossible to have. I remember buying my first bicycle in fifth grade. It cost \$48.00 and I bought it on the layaway plan (*long before credit cards*). Each week for 24 weeks, I gave the bicycle shop owner \$2 from my earnings from an early morning paper route. Though other kids had bicycles, I had to wait six months until I made that final payment. But in the long run, I took care of that bicycle like it was gold. And, obviously, it was a lesson that has stayed with me.

To emphasize this same point about rewards in life, Jesus teaches a parable to illustrate an eternal truth. Jesus says, if a quite undistinguished guest arrives early at a banquet and chooses to sit at the head table, and if a more distinguished person then arrives, and the guest who has placed him or herself at the head table is told to step down, a most embarrassing situation would result. If, on the other hand, that person deliberately chooses to sit at the table in the back of the room, and is then asked to come forward to sit at the head table, then that person's humility gains them all the more honor.

Within this parable, we have two lessons: one for guests and one for hosts. And, as we listen to this lesson on humility, we must also keep in mind that Jesus is speaking about more than observing social behavior. The subject matter really is about the kingdom of God. Jesus is well aware that the human ego is quite clever, and that upon hearing his parable, some may think that by taking the seat at the back of the room, they may not only avoid embarrassment, but lead to elevation to the head table. Some people could easily convert Jesus' instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-exaltation. Jesus does not offer a divinely approved way for a person to get what he or she wants. Taking the distant chair because one is humble is one thing ... taking the seat in the rear as a

way to move up is another.

Genuine humility is one of the characteristics of great people. When writer Thomas Hardy was so famous that any newspaper would gladly have paid enormous sums for his work, he used to submit his poems always with a stamped, addressed envelope for the return of his manuscript should it be rejected. Even in his greatness, Hardy was humble enough to think that his work might be turned down.

Present day humility is seen in likes of a person like Cal Ripken of the Baltimore Orioles. Over many years, without a lot of flash, Cal Ripken did his job day in and day out, because he loved what he did. No excuses. No chest thumping. No whining. Cal Ripken was not the best shortstop or third baseman to play the game, but he did his best with what skills he had, and he did it consistently. Ripken is a fine example of person with vision, hard work, long-term commitment, and humble, simple faith (like a diamond from coal).

As human beings, we attain humility by realizing these facts. However much we know, we still know very little compared with the sum total of knowledge. However much we have achieved, we still have achieved very little in the end. However important we may believe ourselves to be, when we retire from our position or when death removes us, work and life will go on just the same without us. We need to keep in mind that in the overall scheme of life, we are important, but we aren't as important as we think.

Also, we attain humility by comparison with the perfect. It is when we see or hear the expert that we realize how poor our own performance is. Whatever our sport, our hobby, our talent, our skill, our vocation, when we see or hear another person far superior, we are reminded how really far we've come. One author writes: *And if we set our lives beside the life of the Lord of all good life, if we see our unworthiness in comparison with the radiance of his stainless purity, pride will die and self-satisfaction will be shriveled up.*

The second part of Jesus' parable is a lesson for hosts. Being a host carries with it several pleasant and positive connotations, such as friendliness, generosity, graciousness, and concern for the comfort of others. Jesus, however, must have observed an occasion during which hosting was an act by one person to gain power over others, as well as making their guests feel indebted. All of us know and have experienced "the ugly face of generosity that binds ... and the demonic character of gifts with strings attached."

The type of hosts who expect a return on their behavior, will not offer service or food to those who cannot repay. Their guest lists consist of people who are able to return the favor. In the kingdom of God, God is the host and who can repay God? Jesus is therefore calling for "kingdom behavior;" that is, inviting to the table those with neither property nor place in society. Since God is host of us all, we as hosts are really behaving as guests --- making no claims, setting no conditions, expecting no return.

The radical nature of today's lesson should not be missed. Though as Christians and as a church we are called to care for others, what Jesus is saying here is straightforward ... invite everyone to the table, welcome everyone into fellowship. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. The translated word "hospitality" literally means, "love of a stranger." Hospitality, then, is welcoming people into Christian fellowship without any ulterior motives. Hospitality, as the primary work of the church, is simply to welcome the stranger into our community of faith with no expectations of meeting our needs. In the true Christian community, no one is a "project," no one is a "budget item," and no one is more or less important. I believe Jesus is very serious about his church being this generous with its hospitality ... being a real faith home for those who need a home like you and me!

Today's gospel lesson informs us that the cause of God moves forward in this world on the backs of the faithful, largely unknown and unnoted, who exhibit the best in behavior and character without thought of financial or practical gain. Like diamonds from coal, we are being fashioned by God from sinners to saints. Only God can make a diamond from coal. Only God can save us from ourselves. Think ... humility! Act ... hospitably! Work and live ... by grace!