

Elitism

Luke 14:15-24

Martin Luther King Day –January 20, 2008

That is a confusing parable, isn't it? It isn't too difficult to see that in some way that feast is supposed to represent life. It's also fairly obvious that the one holding the banquet is God. But with that being so, what is all this business about a special group being invited first and that only after they failed to respond, were people who were disabled, poor, homeless and otherwise marginalized, allowed to be there? That doesn't sound much like God, does it?

I doubt that it's possible to make sense of that banquet parable without knowing its source. In the Dead Sea Scrolls it was discovered that this divine banquet or "holy feast" idea did NOT come from Jesus. No, this prediction of a heavenly gathering of the chosen at God's table was part of the right-wing religious lore of the time. Ultra-conservative religious groups believed, not only that there would be such an event, but that prior to this great divine banquet, God would first sort out all of the impure, the troubled, the defective, the disagreeable, and the unattractive; so that the banquet would include only the pure, the beautiful, the excellent, and the scrupulously righteous. As you might guess, the ones who fervently believed this were the ones who were certain they would be on the "divine guest list." (One still finds that certainty in the people who claim to know the most about the residents, the furnishings, and the bliss of heaven.) That then, is where the fellow was coming from when he yelled out, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God." He apparently thought Jesus would instantly agree with him. Instead Jesus turned the whole idea completely upside down. He used their own dream of this "holy banquet" to torpedo their warm, fuzzy belief that only the brightest, those whose lives were lived most cautiously, those who seemed most gifted, and those for whom (like this man) "God talk" and "religiousness came most naturally, were automatically the ones who had the inside track, were invited to the banquet of life in this world and the next. Instead, according to Jesus, those are the very ones who often miss the best and deepest of what life has to offer, and do so for trivial reasons. He goes on to say, moreover, that if the truth be known, some of those people with major problems and defects and limitations end up, almost in spite of themselves, closer to the mark than the ones who might seem to have so much going for them.

Elitism is one word for what Jesus was attacking here; religious elitism in this case. He encountered a lot of it (as he would now). It was and is the all too familiar: "Our group has the truth," or "I am among the saved," or "I have found the path to true spirituality," and of course, "Isn't it too bad about so many others who just don't have it!" Though such religious

elitism is often fervent and sincere, is fueled by strong convictions and beliefs, elitism is still what it is.

Religious elitism, however, is only one of several varieties. Intellectual elitism, social elitism, educational elitism, economic elitism, racial elitism all are also very much alive and present among us.

Though there can be similarities, elitisms somewhat different from its close cousin: prejudice. Prejudice focuses on others who it disparages, disdains and dislikes. Elitism, rather, is a disease of one's own self-understanding. It's a distorted self-importance, a self-esteem-gone-to-seed, an inflated idea of the quality of one's own way of being. It's nearly as ugly as raw prejudice but is more sophisticated. Rather than out of hatred or feeling threatened, the elitist typically disregards, disrespects and cuts himself off from others by seeing them as pitiable or irrelevant. He writes people off because, for example, they don't have the truth, or they seem intellectually average or are emotionally complicated or are socially clumsy or culturally behind. Elitism can even carry an element of twisted gratitude. One who was described by Jesus in his parable of the Pharisee and publican, was the man heard praying, "O God, I thank thee that I am not like all of these others."

What makes elitism so insidious, so hard to get at, is that it's often based on a partial truth. That partial truth is that there are tremendous differences in people, in our various approaches to life, in our particular abilities, in what becomes of us because of our experiences. Our differences can be real enough and big enough that certain of us are unlikely ever to become really close or even completely comfortable with certain others. (That isn't as necessary or inevitable as we sometimes tell ourselves, but there is some truth to it.) Despite the attempts at good will, you and I are probably not capable of enjoying, understanding, or even liking any number of those with whom we share the earth.

Where we really mess ourselves up, though, is in what we sometimes infer and decide that those differences mean, both about us and about "them." The fact is that though we often think we know all that we need to know about other types of people, NONE of us are smart enough to determine and decide what is the quality and worth of the life that is lived on the other sides of those differences. We keep deciding anyway though, don't we? It's as if that along with that remarkable grace of God by which a person happens to land in a somewhat stable life, is taught a few human skills, becomes secure enough to be likeable, he ALSO becomes an expert on human worth, significance and relevance and spirituality. The contentment or appreciation of one's own life situation that should lead only to gratitude and

a sense of responsibility becomes instead a subtle arrogance. By virtue of what he sees as his obvious superiority in the game of life, he really believes he is one of the chosen, the elite, the elect; in effect, one of the special few at God's great banquet. As to those inferior creatures who he perceives as cynical or impulsive or pompous or disruptive or flaky or not productive or rude, he's unrelated to them. There certainly is no reason to identify with them, to get to know them or to understand anything more about them. He'll assure you that he isn't prejudiced against them. To the contrary, he is thankful (like the man Jesus described) that he isn't like they are and could never be like that.

Do you see the danger in that? Elitism is an insidious denial of what is the truth about us; that truth being that (as I recently heard someone say) we all live a half step away from hell: that is, we live one mistake away from failure, one failure away from ignominy, one chemical dysfunction in our skulls away from emotional disintegration, one drink away from alcoholism, one impulse away from some kind of self-destruction, one tragedy away from blind despair, one unfortunate decision away from the unraveling of our self-assurance. The real differences between me and the person I least wish to identify with, the one I don't care to even try to understand, the one who I am most tempted to dismiss as a "human throwaway" are a matter of God's grace and/or are far more cosmetic than is comfortable for me to admit.

Some time ago I heard Dr. Tex Sample of St. Paul's Seminary in Kansas City tell an incident that vividly brought home to me something of how this works. Those of you in our Adult Forum know Dr. Sample as the storyteller who introduces each session of "Living the Questions. Even though this story has a very gruesome aspect to it, I think it's worth sharing with you.

The minister of a big-city, downtown church was trying to establish a ministry among some of the hard-core people from the nearby slum area. He befriended a man known as "Big Art," a hard, distrusting, uncouth fellow with a perpetual chip on his shoulder. It took a long time to get Big Art to trust enough to enter the doors of the church and be a part of some of the programs being offered there. He finally did, but almost immediately had a bad encounter with one of the long-time members -- a woman named Ella who was a real pillar of the congregation. The confrontation was so loud that morning, that the minister heard the climax of it ringing down the hall. It ended with Big Art calling Ella a name (a name that most of us would recognize) that both slandered her parentage and that included the "f" word.

Not surprisingly Ella then exploded into the minister's office demanding that Big Art be immediately thrown out of the church and banned from ever again setting foot within its walls.

The minister, having worked to long and hard to get Big Art in the door, wasn't anxious to throw him out. He persuaded Ella to do two things: to think about it for a day; and second, to allow him to tell her Big Art's story. She said it wouldn't make any difference but agreed.

Big Art's story was that when he was a child, his father was an extraordinarily abusive alcoholic. When he was drunk he became downright sadistic in his treatment of Art's mother, of Art and his siblings. The cruelty reached a horrible climax one night when Art's father forced the children to sit and watch while he mercilessly beat their mother – in fact killed her in front of them. Then, as if that were not enough, he severed her head. At which point little Art had tried to escape from the scene. He tried to run out the apartment door. This enraged his father who took the severed head and threw it at Art as he started down the stairs, hitting him in the back causing him to fall to the bottom. Knocked unconscious for a few minutes, he awoke to find his mother's head next to him.

When the minister finished telling that gruesome story and telling of the effect of that experience on the boy, without a word Ella turned and walked out. The minister thought she still looked furious but couldn't tell for certain. Twenty minutes later she was back. She walked into the office and said only, "I guess it's high time for me to learn how to be cussed out!"

I hope you see, this isn't to excuse anyone's calling people obscene names. Nor is it to claim that Art was really some kind of wonderful "diamond in the rough," a person of great depth and hidden wisdom. (We don't know about that.) The issue here was Ella; Ella being brought close enough to the truth of what is sometimes the horrible pain of our human survival and the truth of the fragile way in which, by God's grace we hold onto our lives, that it exploded her elitism – elitism that I'm certain she would have previously denied was there.

It takes a lot of self-honesty, self-examination and introspection to catch ourselves in this. Even more difficult, it requires staying closely in touch with what life is and what the stories are of people that don't seem worth the trouble, the ones who are too different, too far gone to bother with. THEY, far more than those close friends and acquaintances who are a lot like we are, embody kinds of truth about life, a window into the other dimensions of our human struggling, and even insight into aspects of ourselves, that don't reach us in any other way.

Make no mistake about it, whoever "they" are, just like all of us, there's infinitely more to them than can be seen "looking down" at them. They understand more than they are able to articulate, for example; they feel more than they allow you to see, they have more to offer than we think they do, they (like Big Art....but also like every one of us) have pain and fear that they

are trying to keep the lid on. And they (as do we all) have their own façade behind which they're trying to survive another day, another encounter, another worry.

Yes, in the very people we think we don't need, the very ones we prefer to avoid, those who we've dismissed as being too different to be relevant to us, resides whole continents of truth – a kind of truth that you and I need to cut through the elitism, the subtle snobbishness, the self-satisfaction that so easily sneaks in upon us when life is going well, the elitism that freezes our souls.

So much of the brokenness, hurt, hostility and bigotry that happens among human beings, happens NOT because the people who cause it are patently evil. No! So often it comes from good, solid, ostensibly well-motivated, intelligent people who, somewhere along the way have lost track of who they are and of WHOSE they are. In fact, that kind of getting lost is one way of describing elitism. Do whatever you have to to keep that from happening to you!