

A CNN journalist heard about a very old Jewish man who had been going to the Western Wall to pray, twice a day, every day, for a long, long time. So she went to check it out. She went to the Western Wall, and there he was, walking slowly up to the holy sight. She watched him pray and after about 45 minutes, when he turned to leave, using a cane and moving very slowly, she approached him for an interview. "Pardon me, sir, I'm Rebecca Smith from CNN. What's your name?"

"Morris Feinberg," he replied.

"Sir, how long have you been coming to the Western Wall and praying?"

"For about 60 years."

"60 years! That's amazing! What do you pray for?"

"I pray for peace between the Christians, Jews and Muslims. I pray for all the wars and all the hatred to stop. I pray for all our children to grow up safely as responsible adults and to love their fellow men and women. I pray that politicians tell the truth and put the interests of the people ahead of their own."

"How do you feel after doing this for 60 years?"

"Like I'm talking to a wall."

Ok, some background on this gospel text. In the Exodus, once the people of Israel are delivered from slavery, Moses goes up Mt. Sinai in order to receive the 10 commandments. Israel has been delivered from captivity to the Pharaoh – but not for their own sakes – but so that Israel may serve the Lord. This is important to remember.

But when Moses comes back down the mountain, he is aghast that the Hebrews are dancing around a golden calf. They have forsaken the worship of the God who has delivered them for a fake 'god' of their own making. Moses is furious. And God is furious. God severely judges the people for their idolatry. This will not be the last time God condemns Israel. These people have been chosen by God and liberated by God – and now God has expectations of them -- their love, service, and obedience. When Israel fails to behave in a manner befitting God's chosen people, God judges them.

We don't think much about Jesus as a judge. Many say that they want Christianity to be a religion of love, not a religion of judgment and condemnation. They claim that Jesus is all affirming and totally accepting, never judging.

So here we are with today's Gospel, and Luke takes us to a dinner time gathering at a Pharisee's house. The Pharisees were religious leaders, biblical experts, model believers. They also must have been gluttons for punishment because they kept inviting Jesus to their homes for meals! And it never works out very well for them.

Remember, this is a social, not religious event. He is not there as a teacher in an educational setting. He is at a table sharing food with others. He is a guest.

And yet, no sooner has the dinner begun than Jesus launches into a series of parables and teachings that judge both the behavior of the guests and the host. Jesus the guest becomes Jesus the judge. He thereby shows that His kingdom is counter to their expectations for God's kingdom.

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Israel expected that when the Messiah appeared, the Messiah would spread a great banquet table and invite all to feast at God's table. Perhaps the dinner at the Pharisee's house is a precursor of that final, eschatological, or end time, banquet. And we see that along with the invitation to this table – there is also a judgment. We see that Jesus loves us enough to judge us, to teach us His way, to show us the way toward faithful discipleship.

Second, we call the work and teaching of Jesus 'good news,' *evangelion*. Here is truth that is not widespread, readily available to all, obvious to all. It is 'news,' not innate or common wisdom. Scripture and our Catholic tradition give us news we would not have thought up by ourselves, news that could only have come to us from Christ, news that is not affirmed by 9 out of 10 average Americans. Take a poll about what we think about welcoming immigrants and more than half of all Catholics would disagree with the Church's teaching that a person has a RIGHT to emigrate, regardless of a country's laws. Tell a person who is fleeing a death threat, without a job and whose family is starving to go get in line, where there is no line. We're not agreeing with Jesus, but we ARE agreeing with a lot of American politicians. One is God's news. The other is not.

Jesus tells a story at the table, and after telling the story, Jesus declares in plain speech the message that some may have missed in the story. "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." (14:11) In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells a story about the final judgment where there will be a vast separation. Some of those who thought they were on top will be brought down and those who were low will be brought up. Those who recognized Jesus in the poor, the immigrant, the lowly, the imprisoned, the hungry will be pulled into the kingdom. It doesn't fare so well for those who failed to recognize Him. It's actually a big theme of Luke's gospel beginning in chapter 1– there in the Magnificat of Mary that she sang before Jesus was born: "He has deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. The hungry He has given every good thing, while the rich He has sent empty away." (Lk 1:52-53)

When Jesus says "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up" (14:11), He is making a judgment. Good news for those who are low; bad news for those who are on top. Sorry, but if we think that Jesus only lifts up, or uplifts for that matter. Here He clearly says that God promises to engage in both lifting up and pushing down.

We come to church on Sundays in expectation that we will get to be with Jesus. When we come to the Eucharist we'd like a little Good News – at least as we define it – which would tell us we're doing fine; don't worry about everyone else – just look at your own situation. But we can't get away with that. Jesus won't let us. He tells us that we have to be worried about others – especially the poor. And don't blame me – I'm just the messenger – I didn't make this stuff up! I'm stuck trying to live it out too.

We should never sit down at table with Jesus if we never want to have our life held up to divine scrutiny. I hope that here in church we are often affirmed, confirmed. But sometimes we are criticized, judged, and made to reassess our thoughts, actions, and intentions, our giving (or lack of it), and our forgiving (or lack of it). Church is not just a place of love and affirmation; church is a place of truth and honesty and judgment too. We come to church worried about ourselves and our lives only to have Jesus turn our gaze toward others. Downward mobility.

But hear the good news. We don't have to flounder around, attempting to make our way to God on our own, stumbling through life, not knowing which path to take. Jesus loves us enough to teach us. Even

when we settle in with Him at the table for a pleasant time of conversation, He cares enough about us to teach us, to show us a better way, to let us in on the ways of His kingdom.

Third, this is exactly what Jesus is doing for us today. Maybe we have come here hoping to get some help with some trial or struggle. Perhaps we are feeling tired or overwhelmed by what we've got on our plate. There will be times when that will happen.

But Jesus still will hold us responsible. He teaches us. Our actions count. Our behavior is significant to Him. He will patiently teach us to stoop to the needs of others, to welcome a wider array and diversity of folks into our fellowship than we would if He had left us to our own devices.

Maybe, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we have heard Judge Jesus saying to us today: Don't live your life the way you've been living it. Don't be so miserly in your giving. Don't judge the poor, you don't know what a struggle they have had in life; be welcoming to the immigrant who flees desperation and just wants a job and something to eat for themselves and their family – remember, they are your brothers and sisters – and they ARE your responsibility – and they are ME, Christ. No, turn and rethink things. The way you have been living gets you nowhere with me. Live your life my way rather than your way.

When we pray, "THY kingdom come, THY will be done," we should expect this. There's no justice without judgment. No love without indignation when that love is betrayed. Angry judgment against the privileged and the powerful, the rich and the hypocritical, is one way God cares for the poor and the dispossessed.

If we hear this gospel as a word of judgment, then remember this. Jesus loves us enough to tell us what He expects of us. And He wouldn't tell us if He didn't expect us to be able to live up to His expectations for us, promising us, as He promised when He was at table with them, that if we follow HIM, and HIS teaching, that we will be blessed, rewarded by Him in due time. Amen. (all of this freely adapted from Will Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-September 2022, p. 27-29)