

Twentysecond Sunday of Ordinary Time

Finding God by Service of Neighbor
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When God is hard to find it is rarely because he is too high for us to reach, more often it is because he is too close to us. Now there are stories of prophetic figures like Moses or Isaiah encountering God in fear and trembling, in blazing fire or mysterious cloud, in storm or trumpet blast. And we too may have a few “mountain top” experiences that inspires us, that changes the course of our lives. But for most of us, and for all of us most of the time God is present and reveals himself in the everyday routines and normal happenings of our lives. For even if God is not at the top of minds, God can always be found in the bottom of our hearts.

Both Old and New Testament readings today call upon us to be humble. As I like to point out, humility comes from the Latin word “humus” which means soil, earth. Humility is not about self-abasement or self-deprecation, humility is about being grounded, its about being connected to all that is going on around us. Sirach encourages us to look for God not on the sublime heights but in the ground of our soul. If we can but clear that ground, still the clamor, sweep away the clutter, unencumber ourselves, then we will find ourselves in the presence of God.

One thing we can say about the historical Jesus is that he loved a party. We often find him at banquets and wedding feasts, or being invited into someone’s home for supper. There is no record of him having ever turned an invitation to a dinner party down either—whether great or small, rich or poor, sinner or saint, he happily ate with anyone and everyone. Others may have been scandalized at some of the people he would accept invitations from, but this is what Jesus meant by humility—connecting with everyone.

Now, sharing a meal is an intimate act—taking into yourself what someone has cooked and prepared for you. For the host and cook, it’s a act of care and generosity. Care because it takes time and effort, generosity, for food is not free. For the guest its an act of trust and acceptance. Trust that the food is going to taste ok, acceptance that the time spent will be worth it. For both then it’s a form of recognition. I have a habit of asking my students at one point or another during the semester how many had a custom of eating meals together as a family and how strictly was it observed. Even with the mircrowave and the pervasiveness of fast food, most of them say they were raised with family meals and that it was important to be there. Its only when kids leave jobs, or go off to college that eating with those close to us begins to fall away.

I love to tell the story about a Jesuit I know who did his philosophy studies in Mexico. For his apostolic work while at school he would volunteer in a very poor parish. He wanted to start a bible study group but he was having no success. People were just not interested. But they would invite him to their

homes for a dinner of beans and tortillas. His brother friends would kid him that his ministry was “eating the food of the poor.” But my friend came to see that this was exactly what his ministry was—to connect with the poor by eating with them. To honor them by sharing a meal with them, cooked by them. In so doing he would move from being a guest to being a member of the family.

In my Philosophy classes I also talk about two forms of altruism. The first, soft-core altruism is reciprocal. I help you because you can help me. It’s a form of altruism—I am helping someone else, but you can also call it enlightened self-interest—for we both end up better off in the end. Soft core, reciprocal altruism is incredibly important—it’s the foundation of our society, its what built civilization. The second, hard core altruism is where you do something for someone else whether or not they reciprocate. This is also called kinship altruism, for that is where you find it—among family—parents towards children, and as they age, children towards parents. So too brothers and sisters amongst one another, and to a lesser extent aunts and uncles towards nieces and nephews, cousins towards each other. We have evolved to be hard core altruists towards those related to us, because while we may not receive anything in return, we share our genes with them and so the gene responsible for the altruism has spread through the species.

This little philosophical excursus is to draw out Jesus’ last admonition in today’s Gospel—he calls upon us to not simply invite to a meal those who will invite us back—soft-core, reciprocal altruism— but to invite those who will not return the favor because they cannot—to be hard core altruists not just to family, but towards the marginal and the miserable in our community. In effect he is teaching us to treat the marginal and destitute in our midst as if they were family. To welcome inside the social outsider. In fact one of the earliest metaphors for the Church was that of a family. In his Gospel, Matthew calls the church the Household of God, and in his letters, Paul is always referring to his fellow Christians as his brothers and sisters.

Hard core altruism in this case is not to be explained by genetics. We are treating as family those who are not related to us at all. God is a hard core altruist. We sometimes say that the purpose of creation was for us to praise God. But that is just because we cannot imagine a God who would create expecting nothing back in return. But God does not need us, we need him. And we are called to be God’s agents, his emissaries, his priests and prophets, giving to those who cannot give back, at least not in kind. We are called to welcome on behalf of God all those who feel bereft of God. In so doing God becomes more manifest to us as well. Not in fire and storm but in feeding the hungry, tending the sick, consoling the dejected, caring for the suffering, that is where all of us can encounter God whenever we want.