

SEPTEMBER 1, 2013
Luke 14:1;7-14

Tripping Over That Old Ego
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Have you seen the movie, “The Butler?” If so, you might remember the scene when, in honor of his many years of service, Ronald Reagan insists on inviting the butler to a state dinner. The Butler’s wife is thrilled but he feels totally out of place in the midst of the high and the mighty and embarrassed in front of his fellow staff.

When I read the Gospel passage for today, I was reminded of that scene; however, Luke describes a slightly different kind of situation with a different emphasis. Because of his great popularity and his challenging words, Jesus was often invited to banquets. People who, Jesus observed, felt strongly that their social status entitled them to a high place at the dinner table set themselves down to what they believed was the appropriate place for them. Jesus, we know, loved stories of comeuppance. And sometimes at those banquets, the host came to the inflated ego types, whispered in their ears that they needed to move down a bit because more important guests than they were waiting to be seated. Oh, such deflated egos. Oh, how embarrassing. Oh, how wounded the pride of those who needed to move down a peg or two right in front of Jesus and everybody.

The Butler is a good history lesson on the struggles for equality that are not yet over for our sisters and brothers who are African and Hispanic American. This past week I discovered that there is still a debilitating gap in the achievement of full racial and economic equality. My experience and that of my daughter are a testimony to that gap that I would like to share with you. In my story there are some very personal echoes of Luke’s dinner party.

Last Saturday, my daughter Cathleen called me to say that she was not feeling well. She was tired, dizzy, nauseous and unable to eat. There was anxiety in her voice and I immediately told her that we would be down. On Sunday morning we climbed onto a megabus and headed to New York City. That is a whole other story, trust me. We arrived at Cathleen and Peter’s apartment in Brooklyn and were told that her doctor would be calling on Monday. He did, indeed, and sent her and us to the local Emergency Room for some blood tests.

We walked in expecting to have the blood drawn and then we would go back to the apartment to wait for the results. We saw only a few people waiting to register and thought that it wouldn’t take too long; then we took a look at the Waiting Room and we knew that we would be in for the long haul. The waiting room should have been called the patience room because it was filled with patient people used to the reality of long waits. We, Neil, Cathleen, her husband Peter and I, sat, surrounded by and a part of a community of frightened, hurting, confused people. In the mix waiting with us were elderly ladies and gentlemen, younger folks

and moms bringing infants and toddlers. I heard English, Spanish, Haitian being spoken around me. I saw two women in Hijab with faces completely covered, who were being escorted by male relatives. I also saw unfailing courtesy on the part of the staff at the information desk and in the triage area. Mostly I noticed that we were the minority group in that wait and for better or for worst, we were going to receive the same care as every other person in the room.

That was the first moment when my ego went into overdrive. In my mind and my soul, I was struggling with an internal conflict. A part of me was carefully monitoring my words and my actions. I did not want to come across as a privileged white person disdaining the wait but the other part of me was screaming, "We don't belong here. We're used to something better. Let's just go."

But as I looked into the faces of those around us, I knew that we all deserved the same care – better care! Through the next two days I tried to hang on to that awareness as Cathleen spent close to 40 hours in a nightmare also known as the Emergency Room.

When Cathleen was finally called into triage, we her groupies tagged along. There we discovered that this was not going to be a simple blood test. Cathleen's blood pressure was alarmingly low and she was headed for, what the staff called, "The Back."

At times, Cathleen felt abandoned by the medical staff. In fact, she was. Just when she couldn't take it anymore and burst into tears of fear and frustration, a group of medical students walked by. They became her advocates and stayed with her until she was released. They asked questions. They stayed with treatment plans and they provided a calming presence to my daughter. The E.R. doctor called in the Endocrinologist who ordered a specific blood test that would determine the diagnosis and with that situation, she was admitted to the hospital although there were no rooms available.

During that time, even as she was angry about her own care, she was surrounded by prisoners in handcuffs and their police handlers, cocaine addicts wondering why they were having heart attacks, overworked and frustrated staff and stretchers holding human beings squeezed into every available space. When she was cold, they did not have a spare blanket to give her. When her IV ran out, it was not replaced for about 7 hours. And with no one to care but Cathleen, an anonymous man in the next cubicle died in the midst of the chaos.

On the weekend that celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington, the Dream of Dr. King; has not become reality within the walls of a hospital in Brooklyn; the promised land is still barely visible to those who sit and wait. Two other hospitals in Brooklyn have closed and the tidal wave of suffering people has inundated the hospital we used and, until we were in the midst of the chaos, we had no idea of the human cost of those closings. No, the Promised Land is not fully present. The Dream continues to be just that for thousands of people but notwithstanding the total chaos of that Emergency Room, God is in that place.

Cathleen's adventure ended with transfer to a room, good care and the diagnosis of Addison's Disease, certainly not welcome news but life saving news. She is beginning a new life with medical challenges that will always be a part of her daily living. If we had known what was in store for her, we would have chosen

another hospital but we did not know and despite all that she went through, she was given the gift of the rest of her life. For that we are all grateful.

On one of our waits, I noticed a man with a cup of coffee. "Where'd you get the coffee," I asked. "Manhattan," he answered. "Well that doesn't help," I said. That small waiting community spoke up. A couple of people told me that coffee was available right across the street. The Communion of coffee drinkers was established.

This Communion Sunday is particularly meaningful to me because I am yet more aware of the Banquet that is spread for all to enjoy. I bring to this table the memory of every face I encountered at the hospital: those patient folks waiting for service, the abrupt registration person whose sole responsibility is to make sure that every line is filled in correctly; the security man who knows many of the folks coming in and his respectful greeting to all, even the alcoholics and addicts; the Triage nurse whose empathy and concern were gratefully appreciated; the nurse who was so overwhelmed that she was not able to function properly; the security person who ignored the 'one person only' requirement and allowed Neil and I to go in together to see Cathleen; the medical students whose dedication assured Cathleen that she was not forgotten; the EMTs and the police and the prisoners; and the medical staff who cared for the man who died in obscurity.

At the banquet set before us there is no need for ego inflation or deflation, but there is room for all to be nourished with love and care. At the table, all are one family treated with respect, honored with dignity and filled with joy. It is in our hands to set the table, to prepare the meal and to invite all to the feast. May Christ be our guide as we take the first steps in our universal journey to a just and peaceful future. Amen.