

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

It was called Pennhurst State Hospital. When it was built at the beginning of the 20th Century, it was considered to be a state of the art facility for the care of people with developmental issues and mental health challenges.

It was located near the small town where my mom grew up. And, once you were sent there you stayed there the rest of your life.

By today's standards, Pennhurst would be considered woefully inadequate. But at the time, it's what people knew how to do.

It was a large facility, with thousands of residents and employees.

And one of those employees was my grandmother. My mom's mom worked in the laundry at Pennhurst. There were a few ladies from Spring City who ran the laundry, and several of the Pennhurst residents assisted.

The heat was intense. The detergent and bleach caused my grandmother's hands to crack. It was hard work, but the family needed the money just to get by.

Now, most of the people who worked at Pennhurst couldn't wait to go home each evening, getting away from all that human suffering. But my grandmother had a different reputation.

On many Sundays, after Mass, my grandmother drove to Pennhurst to pick up three or four of the patients who helped in the laundry. They all had mental health issues, but Nanny picked them up and drove them to her home.

The family table was already crowded: around the table was Nanny, Poppop, and their six children. But somehow there was always room for three or four residents from Pennhurst.

This happened almost every Sunday, every Thanksgiving, and every Labor Day. My mom and her siblings grew up in a household where you learned how to make room at the table for people who are different, people with specific needs.

My mom and her siblings learned how to help the people from Pennhurst if they had trouble cutting their food, or if they spilled something. They never knew who was coming to dinner. But they always learned how to make room at the table.

Before she died, my mom told me that she believed that my grandmother did all of this – she went out of her way to feed people at her table – because when my grandmother was a little girl her family was very poor. And, more than once, when their family had nothing to eat, they survived because a neighbor made a place for them at *their* table.

My mom believed that my grandmother’s constant care for the residents at Pennhurst was, if you will, her way of repaying the generous people who had fed her as a little girl.

And that’s when I realized something. One of the things I always admired about my mom, and dad, was that they had an amazing talent for being hospitable. It seemed that my mom was born with a natural skill to welcome people, and make people feel treasured. She knew how to gather people from very diverse backgrounds. She never became flustered if someone arrived at meal time unannounced. There was always room at her table.

And it dawned on me – she wasn’t *born* with that skill. She *learned* it. She learned it from Nanny. My mother was taught how to love and respect and welcome and feed and make room for others. She learned it at her family table, sitting next to a patient from a state mental hospital. You have to be taught such things.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is constantly teaching at the table. And, according to the Bible, no one ever sat at table with Jesus, ignoring him and staring at their cell phone! In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus seems to move from one table to the next. And wherever he eats, he teaches us about who God is, how God loves us, and how we can love each other.

In today’s passage, Jesus is at the home of Pharisees. They’ve welcomed Jesus and made room for him at the table. And during this meal, Jesus challenges some assumptions that were prevalent in his culture.

At the time of Jesus, there were all kinds of rules concerning ‘who sat where’ at formal meals. (If you’ve ever done the seating chart of a wedding reception, you know how much work this takes. Who sits where? She needs to be at this table. He needs to sit there!) *Where* you sat revealed how *important* you were. It was all about honor, prestige, and social privilege.

But Jesus tells us that, in God’s plan for us, the focus is NEVER about who is ‘more important,’ who deserves the higher place, who is ‘the favorite.’ In God’s family, the only thing that matters is this: ***God wants everyone at the table. And being at the table is the only thing that matters.***

The guests at the Pharisee’s dinner party were fussing about ‘who sat where.’ But if that’s the focus, then the focus is ON ME. The focus is on MY importance, making sure that MY presence is honored. But if I’m focused on me, then I’m missing the point. And the point is this: we are

just *lucky to be at the table*, and we are called to be grateful to the *host who invited us*.

“Humble yourself,” Jesus says. And when Jesus tells us to be humble, he’s not saying that we should ‘think less of ourselves,’ he’s saying that we should ‘think of ourselves less often.’

“Humble yourself,” by focusing on how blessed you are to be invited to the table at all. Humble yourself by realizing how blessed you are to have food to eat. Humble yourself by moving your chair over just so that we can welcome one more person to the table.

Jesus says, “when you host a meal, don’t invite just your friends or wealthy neighbors” – you know, the ones who will bring you a nice hostess gift from Wegman’s.

Instead, Jesus says, “invite the poor, the crippled, the ones who can’t pay you back in any way.” Invite those who were never taught how to write a proper thank you note.

In other words, “When you have a meal, drive over to Pennhurst and bring home some of the residents.”

We might be tempted to say to Jesus, ‘But Lord, that is hard! And it might be awkward! And it takes work! How can we do that?’

And Jesus might respond, ‘You can do it because you are being taught, every time to come to Mass, to *this meal*.’”

Remember, for *this meal*, not one of us deserves to be here! Not one of us is holy enough or perfect enough to *deserve* a place at the Lord’s table.

But still Jesus says, “Come. There’s room for everyone, including *you*. What’s *not* important is where you sit, or how folks honor you. *You are not the point*.”

The point is this: we are just lucky, we are blessed, to *be at this table*. The focus isn’t me – it is Jesus, who invited us here. The focus is Jesus – who feeds us here. The focus is Jesus – who IS here.

And if you learn the lesson of this Eucharistic meal, who knows? You may learn how to make room for others in the rest of your life. If you learn the lesson of the Eucharist, who knows? People may look at you and say, “She seems to welcome everyone. He is hospitable to everyone. They always seem to find a way to nourish someone else.”

And that is a lesson worth learning and teaching, everywhere.