

Homily for August 16, 2009 (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Cap Corps 15th Anniversary Celebration—St. Francis Parish, Milwaukee
Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:2-3, 10-15; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Have you ever felt as if you were “on the outside looking in?” Some people experience it in childhood, when they’re not chosen for a sports team or invited to a particular party. For others, it’s what happens when they’re window shopping and they realize that what they want to buy is very different than what they can actually afford!

For many people in the United States today, that feeling of being “on the outside looking in” is linked to something even more basic: how they’re going to pay the bills if they or someone in their family gets sick. They are among the over 45 *million* people who don’t have health insurance; and because healthcare is so expensive, no health insurance too often means not seeing the doctor or getting needed medication. Healthcare bills are now the number one cause of personal bankruptcy in the United States.

It’s not because we don’t spend a lot on healthcare. In fact, over \$2 *trillion* a year is spent on healthcare in the United States. Unfortunately, according to a recent study by the accounting firm Pricewaterhouse Coopers, fully half of these healthcare dollars are wasted by doctors ordering unneeded tests, inefficient claims processing, people getting their primary care in emergency rooms, medical errors, etc.

When it comes to healthcare in our country, most of us still have “a seat at the table;” but far too many of us—tens of millions—are “on the outside looking in.” The same could be said for quality education, family-supporting jobs, and affordable housing. It could also be said in many, many other places in the world. In fact, for billions of our brothers and sisters in other countries the situation is far worse: a handful of people live in luxury while virtually everyone else suffers from poverty so grinding and extreme that even the poor in our country would scarcely recognize it.

Thankfully, God is a far better host than any of us. God’s table, as our Scripture readings remind us, has room for everyone who is willing to come. As we reflect on this generosity, it’s important for us to remember at the outset how important table fellowship was to people in the Ancient Near East. Sitting down at the table with some one or inviting them to share a

meal was more than just a matter of feeding them or showing them hospitality. It was also a *social act*.

For example, the proximity of the guests to the head of the table was determined by their social status and the esteem with which they were held by the host. Jesus himself acknowledged this elsewhere in the gospels in his admonition about making sure that one came properly prepared for the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14) and his advice on taking the lower place and counting on an “upgrade” from the host rather than assuming the highest place and then risking the embarrassment of being “bumped” by someone else and sent to the lowest place (Luke 14:7-11).

In our first reading from Proverbs 9, Wisdom—the personification of God’s compassion and the foundation of social order and successful living—issues an open invitation to all who are willing to come to the feast she has prepared. It is important to note, however, that the verses that follow in this chapter also note that while a seat at Wisdom’s table costs nothing, we must come prepared in order to be truly nourished there. (Read Proverbs 9:7-12) We have to be open, humble and teachable.

Similarly, in our gospel reading Jesus freely offers his body and blood to anyone willing to partake of them. As we just heard today and last week, however, not everyone is prepared. Not everyone can see with the eyes of faith. For many of his contemporaries, the stumbling block was their literal interpretation of “body and blood.” For others, it was the idea that Jesus had come down from heaven, when they could only see the son of Mary and Joseph. They thought they knew who they were and who Jesus was. They were not open, humble, or teachable. They could not change.

Accepting Christ and partaking of him in word and sacrament not only encourages change, it *demand*s it. Our faith and what we celebrate in the Eucharist have consequences for how we live. That’s what St. Paul was trying to teach the early church at Ephesus when he admonished them: “Watch carefully how you live....do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.” In contrast with those whose lives and freedom were marked by partying and getting drunk, Paul urged the Ephesians to find their inspiration and joy in the Holy Spirit and gratitude.

The meal is prepared, the table is set, and our seats are open. Are we ready to be seated and to make room for others at the table? +