

“THE TOWN TRAVELER”

A man was walking down the road when he spied a farmer. He approached him and said, “Sir, I have traveled a long way and am thinking of settling in the next town. Tell me, What kind of people are there?” The farmer asked, “What kind of people were in the town that you left?”

The man replied, “Oh it wasn’t so good. The people there were selfish, indifferent, just out for themselves. Couldn’t care less about you or what happened.” The farmer said, “You’ll find the same kind of folks in the next town.” The man thanked him and went in another direction.

Later that day, another traveler passed by and said to the farmer, “Sir, I have traveled a long way and am thinking of settling in the next town. Tell me, What kind of people are there?” The farmer asked, “What kind of people were in the town that you left?”

The man replied, “It was hard to leave. The people sang with you in the good times and helped you in the bad times. It wasn’t perfect, but the people were basically good and friendly.” The farmer said, “You’ll find the same kind of folks in the next town.”

The story, as well as our Gospel reading, demonstrates a contrast between two attitudes of mind and heart. And this contrast of travelers in my story could very well represent the contrast between Simon, the Pharisee and Jesus.

Do you ever notice that sometimes when we find fault with others we may often be expressing anger over our own inadequacies? By his actions and comments, Simon very well represented the first traveler, who complained about the “people there [who] were selfish, indifferent, just out for themselves. Couldn’t care less about you or what happened.”

It was customary in those ancient days that when a guest entered a house, especially one of a well-to-do person, three things were always done. One, the host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace. That was a mark of respect which was never omitted in the case of a distinguished Rabbi. Two, the roads were only dust tracks, and shoes were merely soles held in place by straps across the foot. So always cool water was poured over the guest's feet to cleanse and comfort them. And three, either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of scented oil of roses was placed on the guest's head. These things good manners demanded, and in this case not one of them was done.

Furthermore, Simon was a Pharisee, one of the separated ones, who had no interest in following Jesus. Why should such a man invite Jesus to his house at all?

Maybe, he was an admirer and a sympathizer, for not all the Pharisees were Jesus' enemies. But the whole atmosphere of discourtesy would make that unlikely.

Maybe, Simon had invited Jesus with the deliberate intention of extracting some word or action which might have been made the basis of a charge against Jesus. Again it is not likely, since Simon gives Jesus the title, Rabbi.

Maybe, Simon was a collector of celebrities; and with some contempt he had invited Jesus to have a meal with him. That would best explain the strange combination of a certain respect with the omission of the usual courtesies. Simon was a man who tried to be condescending towards Jesus. He was certainly condescending towards the sinful woman.

Simon's impression of himself was that he was a good man in the sight of men and of God. Simon was conscious of no need and therefore felt no love, and so he received no forgiveness. The one thing which shuts a man off from God is self-sufficiency.

Contrast this with the way Jesus dealt with the sinful woman. The woman was a notoriously bad

woman, a prostitute. The sinful woman, who by the way was not Mary Magdalene, had no right to show up at the party. She came only because Jesus was present. Maybe she had listened to Jesus speak from the edge of the crowd and had glimpsed in him the one person who could lift her from the filth of her ways.

She appeared before him just as she was. And around her neck she wore, like all Jewish women, a little vial of concentrated perfume, which was called alabaster and was very costly. She wished to pour it on his feet, for it was all she had to offer. But as she saw him, the tears came and fell upon his feet. And for a Jewish woman to appear with hair unbound was an act of the gravest immodesty. On her wedding day a girl bound up her hair and never would she appear with it unbound again. The fact that this woman loosed her long hair in public showed how she had forgotten everyone except Jesus, as she rendered a lovely service to him.

And even though he knew what kind of woman she was, Jesus greatly accepted her service. The others looked at the woman and saw the 'filth'. Jesus looked at her and saw the 'wounds'. He saw that she had been sufficiently judged and punished by life. What she needed was healing, not condemnation.

By treating her with kindness, he helped her to believe in her own goodness. Jesus knew that you never improve people by rejecting them. The sheer goodness of Jesus made her feel that she too was good, and made her want to be like him.

As a result of her encounter with Jesus, which we heard from a seemingly misplaced section at the end of our Gospel reading, she began to live a new and better life. And she would travel further down that road than any, who were now judging her.

She had joined a little group of women, whose help was practical and ordinary. Their pious act to support this Rabbi was in direct line with the practice of their time. And similar to the gathering of his disciples, we cannot fail to see how mixed a company of women were gathered. It is one of the supreme achievements of Jesus that he can enable the most diverse people to live together without losing their own personalities or qualities. In these current times, there is nothing which the church needs more than to gather the diverse temperaments and qualities of different people.

Father Roland LaPlante will be leaving us in two short weeks, and I want to take this time to thank him for his ministry and for the opportunities he has given me, during the past six years, of witnessing his love for this parish.

I have seen Father accept our diverse temperaments, our different qualities, and our personal indiscretions, and through the sharing of his kindness and goodness, I have seen his development of an environment, which allows all of us to feel good, and to live and worship without losing our own personalities or qualities. His holiness, especially in exercising his role of Christ in the Liturgy of the Mass and in the Sacraments, has greatly influenced an enhancement of my ministry.

No doubt that Father is representative of our second town traveler, from my opening story, and I know that whoever asks the question, his ready response will be "It was hard to leave. The people sang with me in the good times and helped me in the bad times...the people were good and friendly." May God bless Father so that he'll, "...find the same kind of folks in the next town," - his next endeavor.