

Lectionary 22C 2019, September 1, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

When Andrew Fastow went to prison, he had one question. “What’s the most detested job among prisoners?”

Andy Fastow was a highly educated, intelligent, and wealthy man. At the age of 27 he became the Chief Financial Officer of a rapidly growing Texas energy company doing over 100 billion dollars of business a year. That company was Enron. In 2001 Enron declared bankruptcy making it, at the time, the largest corporate bankruptcy in the history of the United States. The executives at Enron had devised a scheme to “cook the books” hiding losses from shareholders while showing billions of dollars in sales. Thousands of people lost their jobs, their pensions, their homes, and dreams. In the resulting scandal Andy Fastow was the only member of Enron’s executive team to plead guilty and admit to wrongdoing.

Andy regularly received hate mail and death threats from people who had lost their life savings when the company went under.

He was sentenced to ten years of confinement. And when he entered the Federal penitentiary he asked what the most detested job was among prisoners.

“Cleaning the toilets,” he was told. “Ok, give me that job,” said Andy. And from that day forward he dutifully scrubbed every commode and shower stall until they sparkled. He always smiled and he never complained.

Somewhere along the way Andy Fastow realized the path to redemption is a humble path. It’s a path paved with the stones of service to others.

Jesus sees the scramble for the best seats at the banquet. People pushing and shoving to get ahead. “Start out low,” he says. “You might get invited up higher later on.” “Don’t start out too high because the host may send you lower, and then you’ll look foolish.” Clean the toilets. Do the job no one else wants.

Can we see this as another parable of God’s amazing kingdom? Where the first are last and the last are first? Jesus speaks about it all the time. He enacts this reversal of expectations at every step along the way of his ministry. Not just healing the sick, but touching people with skin diseases, reaching out to all who are shunned as impure, unclean, beyond help or hope, offering forgiveness to those deemed unforgivable.

Jesus is God who humbled himself, who came to do the dirty work of suffering and dying in order to show us just how much we want to put ourselves first, make ourselves number one, and push God to the bottom. That’s the universal human story. It cuts across cultures, across time, across rank or status or class. We want to put ourselves at the center of our own life, our own story. We are the main actor, the lead character. Not God. Maybe God is like a sidekick, a buddy who tags along and lends some needed help from time to time. But we’re the ones who are

always on center stage. And when Jesus came we did our best to eliminate him. We did not want a challenger. We do not want to share the spotlight.

Jesus came to show us that God's way always involves the humble path. When we seek humility we choose a road that leads to respect and appreciation. When we seek the lesser chair at the banquet, which we hear Jesus speaking about in this gospel, we acknowledge the position and gifts of others. Humility means listening first and talking second; serving others before serving ourselves; putting the needs of others before our own.

This is the Kingdom of God. Even that title "Kingdom of God" is meant to be an ironic challenge to our assumptions. Because a kingdom implies a king, or a queen. The image of a monarch is anything but humble. When was the last time Queen Elizabeth cleaned a toilet? But the Kingdom Jesus brings in completely reverses our expectations. I can see Jesus cleaning a toilet, or standing at the end of the line letting someone else get ahead of him. I can see Jesus sending invitations to all those living at Water Street, rather than those who live in some exclusive gated community.

Jesus' counsel to his host challenges me. "When you give a luncheon do not invite friends...or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return...but invite the poor...they cannot repay you." Each week this summer we've been confessing our own failure to live up to this command of our Lord. "Quick to feast with friends, and slow to welcome strangers." As the author of Hebrews reminds us which we heard in our second reading today, by welcoming strangers we may "have entertained angels without knowing it." Who are the potential angels I may have turned away because I did not know them?

We believe this Kingdom of humble service is already here. It's not just for the future. We need not be condemned to be satisfied with a world where the scramble to the top defines who we are. We who believe Jesus is raised from the dead are freed from such bondage. Because Jesus is alive his way of humble service, of welcoming the poor and stranger, can become our way too. Amen.