

August 28, 2016  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17, Year C, RCL  
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 2:4-13  
Psalm 81:1, 10-16  
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Perhaps you have read works by James Martin or heard him on National Public Radio. James Martin is a Jesuit priest and prolific author who has a way of telling it like it is with a twinkle in his eye. A couple of weeks ago I read a James Martin article he originally wrote for the 2016 Commencement issue of *The Harvard Crimson*. Martin's article, called "Three Rules for Happiness," offers advice to the soon-to-be Harvard graduates. The author warns the graduating class against what he calls "the patented arrogance that comes with having graduated from an Ivy League school." Imagine.

Reading the article, it became clear that certain other schools' names might to be substituted for "Harvard." And Martin's words of advice and warning may speak not only to graduates but to incoming students of many institutions of higher learning as well. Actually, Martin says his three rules for happiness, passed along to him "by an elderly [fellow] Jesuit" are—three rules to help "combat the inevitable feelings of vanity, entitlement, and general arrogance [, feelings] that tempt all of us," he says, "Harvard or no."

Father Martin's three rules for happiness are to remember, "1.) [You are] not God. 2.) This [is not] heaven. 3.) Don't be a jerk. Remembering that you are not God, Martin says, "has special significance for anyone who has been told for years...that '[you will] be able to change the world.'" "There are many things you cannot change, you are not in charge of the universe, and you don't know everything," he writes. Rule number 2, remembering that "This [is not] heaven," Martin says, "may reduce by a factor of ten, the amount of complaining you do...and therefore, how much you bother everyone around you." As for Martin's rule number 3, "Don't be a jerk," The author admits his own guilt, saying "It's hard not to be a jerk today, since jerkiness is contagious." I have to agree. When someone around me does something particularly annoying, it is mighty tempting to reciprocate in kind. But, Martin advises, "Let the jerkiness cycle end with you. Be nice. Be kind. Try to smile...It's hard. Do it anyway."

Jesus offers Luke's Parable of the Wedding Banquet as a lesson in humility. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk. 14:11) These words may bring us up short when we step back and look through a wide-angle lens at the display of less-than-humble attitudes and behaviors we see every day all around us, and sometimes even within ourselves.

When we tune into any news or social media venue it doesn't take more than a minute or two for us to witness someone exercising a complete absence of humility. "It's all about me." Anything goes—just don't get caught. Or, if you do, get yourself a really clever and well-connected lawyer. I have to admit being about five years behind in the entertainment scene—I just got around to watching the first two episodes of the television series "Suits," now in its fifth or sixth season. "Suits" is about antics in a big fictitious law firm. Are there any "Suits" fans here today? Yes, a few. What's not to like, right?—shady deals, big money, internal politics and backstabbing... Yes, it's really funny to watch. And...is it more truth than fiction? We live in a place and time of a lot of pretentious bravado. The Yiddish word *chutzpah* comes to mind—impudence, gall, audacity, nerve—a boldness that our culture seems to admire and even reward.<sup>1</sup>

Bad boy and bad girl behavior by corporate moguls, politicians, and entertainment and sports icons—conduct that we might think would end a public career —instead fades from public memory as soon as the next scandal erupts. Maybe like me, you were tuning into this year's Summer Olympic Games with gratitude for a break from the constant and caustic presidential election banter, only to see a decorated USA swimmer's behavior disappoint and embarrass not only his fellow athletes, but the whole country whose colors he wears.

The word *chutzpah* actually has its origins in the Aramaic language, a Semitic language that scholars date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> c. BCE in northern Syria. Jesus uses Aramaic words and phrases several places in the Gospels. Perhaps there is some small consolation or comfort in knowing *chutzpah* is an old word and not just a contemporary human peculiarity.

Luke says the Pharisees have been "watching [Jesus] closely," and he was also watching them. Jesus tells the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in response to the way the host's other guests come in and immediately choose places of honor. Perhaps Jesus himself was even brushed aside by arrogant guests scurrying past him to secure the seats closest to their host or other VIPs.

Maybe humanity is as humanity has ever been. We just heard the ancient prophet Jeremiah uttering God's frustration, "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" (Jer. 2:5) And, together, we just read the Psalmist's ancient words, imagining God's lament: "...my people did not listen to my voice...So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!" (Ps. 81:11-13) The antithesis of humility is arrogance—the egotism of privileging our own competence over God's promise.

Thinking back to James Martin, it really isn't surprising that a Jesuit, as in a member of the monastic Society of Jesus, would coin those three rules. Can't you just hear his advice jumping off the Gospel pages? Reading between the lines of today's passage from Luke, we might imagine Jesus saying, "What do you think you are you doing, taking the best seat in the house? Remember, you are not God. Leave the best seat for someone more distinguished. Exercising humility may just save you the humiliation of being asked to give up your seat for someone more important." Imagine Jesus looking around the Pharisee's house and then saying, "Remember, this is not heaven, though it may be a mighty fine wedding banquet. Things are not ever going to be perfect here. This world is messy. And, for now at least, it is the only world you have, so why not make it as good as it can be by not being a jerk." Jesus comes petty close to saying, "Let the jerkiness cycle end with you," when he says elsewhere, "...bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Lk. 6:28b-29, 30b-31).

As Martin reminds us, we cannot control others' unfortunate, even annoying arrogant behavior. We can control our reactions to their actions, starting with our refusal to perpetuate the cycle of jerkiness. Today's lessons remind us not expect rewards in this lifetime for taking the higher road. Just as humility doesn't seek recognition and reward, humble people and actions often go completely unnoticed.

Jesus must have noticed a cadre of VIPs at the Pharisee's Sabbath meal, because after finishing the parable, he gives his host a lesson in true hospitality: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Lk. 14:12B-14) Hebrews reminds us we never know when we might be extending our hospitality to angels: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." (Heb. 13:16) Today's lessons in humility and hospitality come together in the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner; Kushner says, "Do things for people not because of who they are or what they do, but because of who you are." <sup>ii</sup>

Source: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/5/24/martin-commencement-advice/>, accessed August 27, 2016.

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Notes:

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/chutzpah?s=t>, accessed August 26, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/553309504200407678/>, accessed August 26, 2016.