

## Inviting the Crippled

### *“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys”*

Reflection 5 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

At the heart of learning to live a life of love is inviting the crippled into our lives. This is the point Jesus makes in Luke 14:12-24. He says, first, to would-be hosts planning a guest list, “Here’s an idea that could change the world. Think about it. When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (verses 12-14). Then in the story that follows (verses 15-24) he envisions the feast in the kingdom of God. He notes that a whole lot of people are too busy to come. And they’re not just giving flimsy excuses. They’re talking about their livelihoods or having just gotten married. They’re not saying: “My alarm clock didn’t go off,” or “I partied too late the night before,” or “I had to go to a ball game,” or any of a dozen lame excuses we sometimes try out on one another. The reasons these people give for not coming to the banquet are reasons that would be honored in most societies and under most circumstances. These people are being really quite reasonable.

Yet Jesus is saying, “Even the best reasons in the world do not justify rejecting an invitation to the kingdom of God.” And so when this happens, when people are too busy for the kingdom of God, Jesus says, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (verse 21). And he’s not saying, at least in this text, to provide for the needs of the poor and disabled. He’s not saying to send food to the poor and disabled. He’s not even saying to make up some Thanksgiving baskets for the poor and disabled. He is saying to invite them to dinner, which is a whole other matter. Sit at table together. Really accept them. Recognize them as equals. In the Christian community no one is a “project.”

Instead of inviting people from the same social circle, invite the crippled, the lame, and the blind, even the transients out on the public roads – anyone who will come! Because God’s is a worldwide reign of love, and the usually excluded are not excluded. In fact, there is always a special place for life’s crippled ones. As we know from the classic story of The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), the kingdom of God consists of giving the hungry something to eat, giving the thirsty something to drink, inviting strangers in, clothing the needy, looking after the sick, and visiting those in prison. We simply must learn to live lives of love.

I still remember Rosa Smith. Rosa is one of the names out on our Wall of Memories. She’s second on our wall. She died over thirty years ago, a single mother with a little boy named Avery. She was gentle, sweet, scared (I thought), and marginally employable. When she had work, she would catch a six o’clock morning bus to child care to catch a seven o’clock bus to work, and then retrace it all at night. Debbie and I were pretty good about visiting Rosa, every two or three weeks, or maybe four or five weeks. She lived in the projects by Stamford Hospital. In fact, she lived right where the grand new hospital is now. We’d climb urine-splattered staircases up to her bare little apartment. The elevator usually wasn’t working. But we’d do it every two or three weeks, or maybe four or five weeks. Then one day a call came. Rosa had been found dead in her apartment, three to four days dead; she’d apparently slipped in the bathroom

and hit her head. How long it took her to die, no one knew. We'd been there just two or three weeks before, or maybe four or five.

God has a vision of a worldwide kingdom where love reigns, where it's learned and practiced and spread. To borrow in part from a list in Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*, it's a vision for all the crippled of the world – whether they be flunk-outs or drop-outs or burnt-outs, whether they be broke or broken, whether they be drug heads or divorced, whether they be HIV positive or herpes-ridden, whether they be brain-damaged or incurably ill, whether they be barren or pregnant too many times or at the wrong time, whether they be over-employed, underemployed, unemployed or unemployable, whether they be the shoved-aside or the lonely or the incompetent or even those others judge as “stupid.”

There must be such a place – a gathering, a church – where all who come, all whose lives we touch, regardless of who they are or whatever they have done, will know that they can start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and then discover within themselves the Spirit of God. There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where all can come and, through the grace and acceptance they find here, be liberated from addiction and sin and shame, and from anything that weighs down the human spirit. There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where no one is left behind, where no one is judged or discriminated against on the basis of birth. There must be a place open to people in process, open to people who haven't got it all figured out, who are wrestling with life's toughest issues. There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where people master the arts of grace and forgiveness, where they learn to humbly hear one another and thereby acquire the otherwise hidden wisdom of others. And such a place shows its true colors first by whether or not it invites in the crippled of the world.

I want us to take a moment and look at the crippled in our lives, because they're there. And we're going to go a bit metaphorical here. We're going to expand the concept a bit. Think of someone whom you find really tiresome and difficult, so much so that you generally maybe avoid this person. Somehow who annoys you, whom you find often inappropriate. Anthony de Mello in his marvelous, little book *The Way to Love* (pp. 37ff.) suggests that you are, quite conceivably, in the presence of someone who is crippled. And if you will only invite this person, this person from the streets and alleys into your life, he or she may make you a gift that none of your “respectable” friends can make you. Because he or she just may reveal yourself to you and reveal human nature to you, and you will learn from this person what you could never learn from anyone else. You will be blessed by God, as Jesus says.

But what they do, the things that so aggravate you, they do not do because they are stubborn or malicious (as you perhaps supposed) but because in some sense they are crippled and blind. And when you understand this truth, suddenly you will have room in your heart for those who have been consigned to the streets and alleys by others – and previously by you. You will see that the crippled people of the world come to you with gifts. They are the ones through whom God best teaches us. If we ever become wise, it will be because we have spent time in their presence. And they will open up our hearts as none of our “cool” friends can. And now we can enjoy the freedom to go anywhere, to avoid no one – that is, the freedom to enter fully into God's reign of love.

– Dale Pauls