

I hate to pass up an opportunity to talk about circumcision, which is used here as a metaphor for conversion. Conversion calls for a complete change of life. Circumcision isn't just a removal of some skin, but a way of speaking about one's total dedication to God. So the Jewish Scriptures use the metaphor about people with uncircumcised lips (Exodus 6:12); and a circumcised heart (Leviticus 26:41; Ezekiel 44: 4, 9; Deuteronomy 30:6), and uncircumcised ears (Jeremiah 6:10). And today the Letter to the Colossians refers to our uncircumcised flesh. Circumcision is a metaphor about cutting off everything in life that gets in the way of complete obedience to God. [We'll come back to this in a few minutes.]

These readings require us to understand the culture that Jesus lived in and spoke about, in order to understand his examples and his parables. A very important value was hospitality. Hospitality is what's extended to the stranger, the foreigner, the unexpected visitor. And this hospitality was marked by abundance -- not the leftovers or what can be scraped together, but the best in your house, and enough that those served will have enough and then some! This was a cultural expectation quite different from taking care of your family, your friends, and the other people in your village -- this was also expected, but it was not deemed hospitality, but *hesed*, a wonderful Hebrew word that means "loving kindness."

Hospitality as a cultural value was marked by its extravagance, and in this way it mirrored God's abundance and extravagant love. In the Scriptures we've heard these past few weeks, we have examples of both: Abraham and Sarah showed *hospitality* to the three strangers -- they baked bread, slaughtered a steer, and gave the strangers curds and milk. On the other hand, when Jesus was a guest in the home of Mary and Martha, they showed *loving kindness* to their close friend invited over for a meal. The good Samaritan showed *hospitality* to the injured man who was a foreigner and a different religion, and that parable reminds us that we must be neighbor to everyone. Early Christians were reminded not to show loving kindness only to kinfolk, and friends, or even fellow Christians, but that Christians must be extravagant neighbors with foreigners, immigrants, even people of different religions.

Compare that to the behavior that occurred in Sodom and Gomorrah (referred to in the first reading) -- where a horrific *lack of hospitality* was shown to the foreign guests. Lot and his wife took in the strangers as the proper response of hospitality, but the rest of the village failed. Instead of honoring and supporting that hospitality, the men surrounded the house and demanded that the visitors be brought out so they could be abused. Lot was able to protect the foreigners; but the villagers' behavior was a pervasive failure to extend hospitality. Their intention was so terrible that it brought shame on the whole village, which God therefore planned to destroy.

Today's parables also rely on understanding that culture's norm of hospitality. Most of the people lived a precarious existence, struggling day to day to have enough to eat. They didn't bake a week's supply of bread because it would go stale and have to be thrown away; they didn't have so much that they could afford to throw food away. Nor did they only rely on themselves or take care of themselves -- it was a collective responsibility to care for the entire village, living out the loving kindness that God showed to them by caring for one another's needs. To do otherwise brought shame on oneself and one's family. To fail to show hospitality brought shame on one's family and one's entire village.

Today we heard a collection of parables and statements about prayer. The people could easily understand the need to pray for their daily bread -- it was a basic issue of survival. It was more unusual to hear Jesus teach them to call God "abba," father. It was a more personal and direct form of address to God.

That opening word, Father, can also refer to God's *power*, because in that culture the father was the one considered to be the holder of power; and God even more so. God is the One with the power to provide for daily needs; the One with the power to forgive sins; the One with the power to protect us from danger and our attraction toward evil. The prayer is a powerful statement of God's power over the forces in the world that lead to victimization and domination.

The parables that follow give us more understanding about prayer. They rely on the people's understanding about hospitality -- of course the fellow will get up and hand over some bread because he will be shamed if he doesn't. He must be a good neighbor. This is an example of the "reign of God," because extending hospitality is a mirror of God's own love.

These aren't parables that teach us to "persist in prayer in order to wear God out until God finally gives in." Understanding the culture helps us to understand the point of the parable. If you who are parents know how to take care of your kids with loving kindness (not giving them stones and scorpions when they ask for food), how much more does God know how to care for all God's children. And if a culture knows how to show hospitality to a stranger, or a non-believer, then how much more God understands and responds when we ask for the Holy Spirit.

These parables teach us about the reign of God. They show us that in order to avoid bringing shame on ourselves, and on the Body of Christ, we must be neighbor to everyone -- "the sinner and the tax collector;" the poor, the oppressed, the victimized; the foreigner, the immigrant, and anyone who's "different" from me. In doing so we're showing the extravagant hospitality of God toward everyone, because "God's sun shines on those who are good and those who are evil; and God's rain falls on the just and the unjust."

The reign of God exists because God is with us; because Jesus is united with God; because we're united with Jesus. Wherever we are, behaving like God, God is there. If we sin, then we bring shame on ourselves and we bring shame on God -- because we're one with God. That's the scandal of our sinfulness; and it helps us to understand the scandal caused to others when they look at us, at the Church, and see our shameful behavior.

We avoid shame and scandal when we show extravagant hospitality to the stranger and loving kindness to those we care about. We sin when we fail to do so. We know how to do it because we have the natural instinct that parents have to care for their children. God has already been placed that desire in our minds and hearts; "we only have to carry it out." Conversion is our total surrender to God's power and desires rather than pursuing our own thoughts and wishes. Conversion is our ongoing effort to cut off and dispose of whatever is contrary to God's way. That's why all of us can respond to God's invitation to circumcision.