Imagine Lent as a one-act play. The venue is a room with a banquet table. A number of guests have arrived. The host is Jesus. Let us assume that Jesus learned how to host a gathering by watching his own parents and by attending temple services. His visit to the temple when he was 12 years old was memorable. He got separated from Mary and Joseph and his parents searched for him for three days. He never forgot his mother’s frustration: “Child, why have you treated us like this?” What did Joseph say? We will never know—but we give thanks for Joseph today.

Now back to Jesus who is entertaining his guests for dinner. The first guest is Satan. Just recently—on Lent I-- he invited Jesus to play God in the wilderness. Of course, Jesus said “Away with you, Satan”—perhaps Jesus learned directness from his mother. But here Satan is, wily and entertaining.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, is also at the table. He had come to Jesus by night—was he hiding his faith? Was he a true seeker or a spy? Jesus was kind to his night visitor. Where did Jesus learn kindness? He told Nicodemus about God’s love for the world. He told him that God did not come to condemn but to love.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well in this coming Sunday’s Gospel. He asked her for a drink—and now he welcomes her to his table. His new friend was not totally forthcoming about her life. Who is? But Jesus was not put off. He said to her:

“You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband;’ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” Jesus’ disciples were astonished that he would talk with this woman of many husbands. They must have been utterly baffled to see her at Jesus’ Welcome Table. How did Jesus learn to love the people like the woman at the well?

On the Fourth Sunday of Lent this year, Jesus meets a blind man. Of course, his disciples were quick to judge: “Who sinned—this man or his parents?” If you are born different, you or someone must have sinned. Right? Jesus said: “Being blind is not about sinning. I am the Light of the World.” So, Jesus, a disciple of Moses, includes the blind man as a dinner guest. Who taught Jesus that God loves the person different and the person like him?

On the Fifth Sunday of Lent—in a few short weeks—Jesus will raise up Lazarus in the village of Bethany. He also meets his sisters Mary and Martha. So, the three of them are invited to Jesus’ house for dinner. Will Lazarus have much to say? Will he say: “Would it have been worth while, to have bitten off the matter with a smile, to have squeezed the universe into a ball, to roll it toward some overwhelming
questions, to say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead.’” Will he say something profound to Jesus? Like: “to be conscious is not to be in time.” Or, “after such knowledge, what forgiveness?”

I am sure Mary whom Rowan Williams has called the “silly, time-wasting sister doing the unexpected” will love the dinner party. Once again she will be able to absorb the loving presence of Jesus, “to be with him who has chosen to be with us, to find an identity only in (his) presence, (his) love.” It seems that Jesus understood the dynamics of a household in Bethany. Who was his teacher about family?

There they are: Jesus, Satan, Nicodemus, the nameless Samaritan woman, a man blind from birth, Lazarus, Mary, Martha…. The host is Jesus. He engages Satan in conversation; he accepts Nicodemus with his many questions; he sees through and loves the Samaritan woman; he becomes for the blind man the light of the world; he restores Lazarus and absorbs the angst of Mary and Martha. With his guests, Jesus is self-giving, his love cannot be contained. Truly he loves the world a great deal. He does not condemn this world of his encounters; rather he includes them in his life, in their woes and in their very death. Jesus began to weep when he saw where they had laid Lazarus. Jews saw Jesus’ love for Mary, Martha and their brother: A rare love; A love unique; God’s love. Did Jesus learn of God’s love from the love of his family?

At this banquet in this one-act play we encounter God who has borne all that his guests bear. He has made the “fabric of (their) history” his own garment. These guests, perhaps even Satan, have encountered the compassion of God in the love of Jesus. Jesus takes away destruction and death—and he makes room for love, compassion, mutual giving and life in communion.

Jesus is the host in this play. The people at his table are a lot like us. There is room for us at the table. Once we come to the table, we will know it as a place of mystery. In time we will know that our host will become the host held up for the life of the world: “The dripping blood our only drink, the bloody flesh our only food.

Coming to Jesus’ banquet table with his friends is for us all “for the journey homeward, arriving by roads already known, at sites and sounds one has sensed before, the knowledge needed is not special, the sole essential a sad unrest which no life can lack.” Come to the table. Come to God’s Welcome Table. Let us treasure all these things in our hearts.

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