

In 2001 children's book author and illustrator Jarrett Krosoczka published his first children's book. In celebration of this achievement, he went back to his elementary school to give an author's presentation, most likely to encourage children that, with a lot of hard work and dedication and creativity, they too could be a published author one day. But that isn't what ended up happening.

As he was setting up for his presentation in the school cafeteria, Jarrett looked over at the kitchen and recognized the lunch lady busily preparing lunch for the day. He hadn't thought of her since he was a student in that school, but since he recognized her and remembered her name, he went over to say hello. And Jeannie the lunch lady remembered him too, even though she first called him by his uncle's name. But to be fair, she had been his uncle's lunch lady too, even though he was 20 years older than Jarrett. After he asked her how she was doing, Jeannie the lunch lady began telling Jarrett about her grandchildren. And this, he says, blew his mind.

If Jeannie the lunch lady had grandchildren, he reasoned, that meant she had children, which meant at the end of a school day she actually left the cafeteria and went home and had a life outside of the school. While this might seem an unoriginal realization to you or to me, Jarrett realized in that moment he had not given his lunch lady much thought beyond seeing her at lunch every school day. That was a moment he realized Jeannie the lunch lady was more than someone who served him, and he decided to use his creativity as a writer and illustrator to atone for his former selfishness.

That is how Jarrett Krosoczka's Lunch Lady graphic novel series for children came to be. For those unfamiliar with the series, it is enjoyable no matter your age. The heroes – of course- are lunch ladies who fight crime in the form of cyborg substitute teachers, deadly mathletes, and school bus monsters using fish sticks that transform into nun-chucks, spatulas that convert to hand held helicopters, called spat-u-copters, and hair nets big enough to ensnare baddies of all shapes and sizes. At the end of every book, the lunch lady captures the bad guy in her hair net and proclaims, "Justice is served!" Not surprisingly, children (and some of their parents and teachers) enjoy these books with enthusiasm. But these books have done far more than teach children to love reading.

Jarrett hears from children who love the books, but he also hears from lunch ladies across the country who thank him for, "making superheroes in our image." For the most part, lunch ladies have not been treated kindly by popular culture, and

Jarrett's books have brought much to light when it comes to how we see and treat the women and men who provide the meals we ate as children and the meals our children, grandchildren and neighborhood children eat. Jarrett has heard stories of how lunch ladies do much more than just serve lunch – some work with guidance counsellors and report when they notice something is amiss with students. When a group of lunch ladies in Kentucky realized that 67 % of their students were not eating regular meals in the summer, they retrofitted a school bus and drove around serving lunch to those children during the summer. In response to this, Jarrett started a program called School Lunch Hero Day where children can come up with creative ways to thank their lunch staff. But even more than that, Jarrett's books and School Lunch Hero Day have deeply touched the lives of those who serve school lunches. One lunch lady said before School Lunch Hero Day she felt like the "last person on the planet" at the school where she works, because she felt like no one ever saw her. And she isn't alone. Other lunch ladies have said the Lunch Lady books and School Lunch Hero Day made them take pride in what they do, realizing that feeding the children in their communities so they can have full bellies so they can learn and grow is serving an important and vital role in their schools and communities.

That is what makes Jarrett Krosoczka's books the same stuff of the Kingdom of God Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel; because both lifted what some would say is a position unseen or disrespected in society into a place of recognition and appreciation, an essential part of becoming God's Beloved Community.

It is important to realize where Jesus is and who Jesus is with in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus was not surrounded by curious crowds or devoted disciples. Jesus was with a leader of the synagogue and the other guests that leader had invited to his house for a formal meal. This is an example of how Jesus practiced inclusivity; he didn't just eat with those who had bad reputations, or were his followers, today we see he also ate with religious leaders of high esteem, even if they were suspicious of him. We can see he also recognized the complex social structure around such formal meals in his time.

Today's Gospel says Jesus noticed how people chose their seats at the table for a formal meal. Some of the historians and scholars among us most likely already know that the society in Jesus' time included an economy of reputation where a person was shamed and respected depending on public behaviors. Such as where one chose to sit at a formal dinner. If a person sat at a place higher than their place in society, being asked to sit somewhere else was a form of shame and hurt that person's reputation. Likewise, choosing to sit at a place reserved for folks of lower social standing and being asked to sit in a seat representing a higher place in society was something that could boost a person's reputation.

Which might make it look like today Jesus was saying to be humble, but Jesus wasn't giving social etiquette lessons. Because such a system can be easily manipulated; such as when a person intentionally chooses to sit where they know they will be asked to move up. Jesus' parable about where to sit isn't about knowing one's place in society, it is about how God's Kingdom operates. In God's Kingdom the table isn't in the shape of hierarchy, so there is no need to play such games, it is in the shape of beloved community; where we are all welcome as God sees us, where lunch ladies are heroes, not servers no one pays attention to.

That is also what is at the heart of what Jesus told his host about who to invite to a formal dinner. In the culture of Jesus' time, such dinners were quite often opportunities for forming political alliances and strategic friendships. In God's Kingdom, there is no need for such things, as all are beloved children of God who come together to share what God gives with joy. Remember, in many places in the Gospels, Jesus compared God's Kingdom to a banquet or a feast that looks different from what was expected of the time.

And as much as we might want to say things are different for us living in our modern and enlightened time, we all are aware there are still structures that require posturing behaviors within hierarchies like schools, universities, governments and communities. Even the church has to deal with such things. After all, until Jarrett's books about lunch ladies came out, most women and men who work serving lunch in schools would most likely tell us they were on the low end of a hierarchical structure, mostly because very little respect was shown to them by students or staff.

That is why we still need to hear Jesus' words from today's Gospel, because they challenge us to step back and consider who we see, how we see each other, and how we, like Jarrett the children's book writer and illustrator, can do some Kingdom of God table turning in our lives and the world. How we might see the people or person who gets overlooked by society and help bring them to the heart of a community by recognizing their contributions. This can make us think about how we see and treat the people who serve us our meals or coffees, whoever stands on tired feet on the other side of a counter in a store or a bank. How do we recognize our shared humanity? How do we listen to people or recognize their contribution to our community?

Jesus' words in today's Gospel can also help us reassess our ministries, and ask ourselves the tough question are our ministries serving us or God and our neighbors? Do we care more about increasing our reputation in the community? Or are we trying to find ways to show our neighbors no matter who they are, God loves and includes them in God's Kingdom? Will we serve the international student or the person living in a group home the same as we serve the professor who comes to Wednesday free

lunch? Do we give our prayer shawls to certain people or to anyone who asks or even to those who we believe might need a reminder of prayer and love? How do we make our Sunday worship service authentic and at the same time welcoming and inclusive even to those who might be here but have never set foot in a church before, or don't know if they believe, or don't know a soul here? When we are outside this church, how do we show God's love and presence?

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea. Today's Gospel challenges us to reflect on how we are practicing God's Kingdom, God's Beloved Community, that doesn't reflect what makes a person important or prestigious in the eyes of the world, but that shows we are all beloved by God.

Remember, God's economy is not one of shame, but one of Love. So if these words challenge us, such a challenge is not meant to shame us into embarrassment, but to remind us of God's tremendous love for us, a love we are not to keep to ourselves, but are to use it to turn the tables of shame into those of God's Kingdom where God's justice and mercy and love is served.