The Indiscriminate Host

John Shea from "Stories of Faith"

People came to Jesus
with God in their pockets
and their pockets sewn tight.

Jesus swept his arm over the heads of all.
"Let the one with ears hear!
God is among us.
God is outin-withside,
inhind-befront,
overneath-underhead.
Do not try to tie God to a stake and stare.
Catch the beauty of the butterfly God on the wing.
God is what we have but cannot hold,
what we dwell within but cannot domesticate,
a home with unexplored rooms,
a foreign land with warmth."

The crowd looked at one another,
shook their heads,
and returned to working and making love.

One day
Jesus looked up,
not to the drunken sky
Lurching and weaving on its way
dazzling and darkening all beneath it,
But to the late afternoon crowd,
rumbling lunchless toward him
hungry for more than God's word.
"Where will we find enough food?"
The eternal worry of the host.

But the bread he broke defied arithmetic,
multiplying while it divided;
and the blessed fish spawned baskets of brothers

Another day
The monitors of the Stomachs of the Poor
rolled a question as smooth as a river rock
and flung it at Jesus.
"Why do not your disciples fast?"
To the question of fast
came the question of feast.
"How can they fast
when the Bridegroom is with them?"
The logic of spite
is the snap of a snake.
"Ah! Now we know.
You are a drunkard and a glutton!"

Before they could answer with their feet
and pivot on the heels of anger,
their backs bobbing away from his banquet,
Jesus threw a story around them
like a rope.

"Once there was a great man
who gave a great supper.
All was ready,
as poised as the breath of God
before the first day of life.
The servant was on the road,
dancing with the good news of festivity,
banging the drums of party.

The first invited calculated:
'I have bought a yard of land
and must measure it with my thumb
The second invited clucked:
'I have bought five yoke of oxen
and I must flick the flies from their ears.'
The third invited sighed:
'I have married a young wife
and I must hold her through the night.'
The servant returned, his hands
as empty as a man who has dropped a child.
He spoke each excuse in a whisper.
'Out again!' the great man bellowed.
'to hedge and highway, street and lane.
Be as thorough as Noah.
Persuade them all.'

The host waited at the door
and welcomed first a blind man.
'Sir, my eyes could not find your home
but my nose found your food.'
Next a cripple greeted the great man.
'The hill of your house is high, sir,
but my one good leg is strong.'
Then a poor woman with a child of unflinching eyes
blocked the door like a star.
'If with this food we talk and plot,
I and my son will eat with you.'
Then came a jumbling tumble of people
like they fell from an upended sack.

The servant was the last to dance in.

'Am I a guest too?'
The great man stroked his chin.
'Do you want to be?'

'Yes!'
'Then you are. But tell me:
What did you say
to all these people?'
The servant stroked his chin.
'I sang in the streets:
There is a feast for all
who want to feast with all.'
The great man turned to his eager guests.
'In this house
there is always a feast
for those who seize it.'"
To Jesus
every person was a guest.
An invitation had gone out
from the heart of all life
to every heart within life
for does rain discriminate
or the sun play favourites?

His voice was the music of welcome
in the ears of rejection;
his presence a silver setting in the slum
with linen napkins on the laps of lepers
and delicate china cups
cradled in calluses,
their thin rims pressed between lips
thick and blistered with thirst.

Now those who know
the head from the foot of the table
were offended by this meal.
They regarded God as a knife
which divides the rotten from the righteous.
So they burst into the middle of forgiveness.

“Ah! More guests!” cried Jesus.
“Have respect,” they threatened.
“Do you know who you eat with?
In the nature of things
can what is out be in,
can what is last be first?”
Jesus turned on them
like the knife of God they believed in.
“In the nature of things
if all are in, can anyone be out,
if all are first, can anyone be last?”

And the pure gathered their robes around them
and went into a draped room
where they agreed
that it was unpardonable of him
to make God
as accessible as a village well.

Even when Jesus was a guest
he slipped into being a host.
Once on his way through Jericho
a dwarf of a tax collector, Zacchaeus by name,
whose eyes were as tarnished as Roman coins
and whose hands were no bigger than a stolen purse
climbed a tree to spot Jesus.
But Jesus spied him
“Zacchaeus, hurry down.
Tonight I dine at your house.”

Now who is host and who is guest
when one invites and one accepts?
What can happen at a meal?
Can more than bread be shared?
Can more than wine be drunk?

In the morning Zacchaeus pulled the rusted key
from the centre of his soul
and opened the locked boxes

where he kept the sweat of his country.
The people came and reclaimed
from the tall Zacchaeus
what the small man had taken
    sixty
    a hundred fold.

It was the much in meals that Jesus loved.
The baskets of bread left over,
the fishes still to be eaten
and the table companions brimming,
amazed that they are cherished too much,
reeling at the extravagance of Jesus,
overtaken by the lavish God

With Jesus
it always ended that way.
A hook in the heart
in the guise of a question.
    "Who proved neighbor to the man in need?"
    "What son did the will of the father?"
"Is it right to do good on the Sabbath?"
Now who is host and who is guest
when the one invited in turn invites?

It was the much in Magdalene that Jesus loved.
For as Mark says,
    "He was too much for them."
Like a woman who loves too much,
like an ointment that costs too much
and is spilled too much,
like a seventy times seven God

who forgives too much,
like a seed that grows too much
and yields thirty sixty
        a hundred fold.

It was the much in meals that Jesus loved.
The baskets of bread left over,
the fishes still to be eaten
and the table companions brimming,
amazed that they are cherished too much,
reeling at the extravagance of Jesus,
overtaken by the lavish God.

Go then
to the man who saw the wind
and ask,
"Master,
who is my neighbor?"
And suddenly
you are on the road
that winds from Jerusalem to Jericho.
Clubs rush from the bushes
and the bright day of journey turns sunless.
You wake in the ditch,
as broken as firewood,
as helpless as a ram on the altar.
A face enters your blurred eyes.
It is the priest of the temple,
the tassles of his robe
pulled above the dust of the road.
He is passing you by,
hurrying to ceremony.
Another face
belonging to a teacher of wisdom
is studying you from the road.

You reach out an arm of pain
but he sees no wisdom in taking it.
Another approaches.
It is the face of the one you hate,
probably one of those who beat you,
come back to finish it.
Strange!
You see your tears in his eyes.
His large hands are under you.

You are out of the ditch!
The arms of your enemy
are carrying you to health.

Jesus told so many stories
that he became one,
the story of the growing God