

Proper 17C 2019 Sermon

Luke 14:1,7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

When I was involved in hospice in Texas and in Nebraska, people would sometimes ask me, “Why do you volunteer for hospice? Isn’t that depressing? Doesn’t that deplete your energies, being around people who are dying all the time?” And I usually answered something to the effect of, “Sometimes, yes, it can deplete my energies; but on the whole, I find it energy-*giving*, not energy-depleting! For when life becomes so very precious, as it does when you or your loved one doesn’t have much longer to live, you tend to let go of pretenses, stop worrying about putting on your ‘best face,’ your façade, drop your defenses, stop living only out of your ego – and live from your True Self, who you *really* are in God. And to be present at such times of vulnerable **genuineness** is always a gift.”

And here’s the thing: that True, Genuine Self, who you *really* are in God, is not anything you have created, yourself; it is a gift of God. The only “achievement” you can claim is in doing what you can to get your ego self out of God’s way.

I recently read an article by a rabbi who was talking about that story from the Book of Genesis where people built the tower of Babel, trying to reach the heavens, in order to “make a name for themselves.” (Gen. 11:4) But God did not approve of this **self**-naming, this effort to achieve fame for themselves by their impressive building.

In contrast, in the very next chapter of Genesis, God calls Abraham, telling him, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **I** will... make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...” (Gen. 12:1-3) The rabbi comments: “Part of the power of God’s promise to

Abraham lies in the stark contrast it represents with what *precedes* it [the story of Babel]: a **name** is something to be *granted* by God, not *pursued* in quest of self-glorification... Arrogance goes hand in hand with forgetting about God: Who needs God to grant us a name when we can earn one ourselves?"¹

In Jesus' parable in today's Gospel, a wedding banquet is held, and the guests jockey among themselves to take the places of honor; but it is the **host** of a banquet who rightly bestows honor, not the guests themselves. It is the host who knows the proper seating arrangement. **God**, host of the heavenly banquet, bestows *true* honor and blessing; we don't achieve it, earn it, or deserve it. Jesus concludes, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Life's goal is not status or recognition or esteem, but rather *participation* in the life-giving flow of God's love, grace, and mercy – which we have done nothing to achieve or deserve. And our all-too-human drive for recognition and approval is **not** a sign that we are *participating* in that life-giving flow of grace and love. In the words of David Lose, Jesus offers us "an invitation to a life freed from the unnecessary constraints and burdensome worries of what everyone else thinks..."²

My friends, Jesus' perspective is so very counter-cultural – it was in *his* day, and it is in ours. For, we live in a society where one's sense of worth might be determined by how many "likes" one gets on Facebook or Twitter, or how many "views" one gets on YouTube. Politicians put great stock in how big the crowds were at their recent rally or how where their approval rating stands in the most recent polls. Retailers and entertainers alike market their own "brand;" and the success of corporations is not determined by the *good* they do, but rather by their stock price or profit margin. All of these things are values of the kingdom of **this** world, *not* the kingdom of God. God does not ask us to "make good" in the world, but rather to *do* good by participating in the gratuitous, divine flow of love and mercy.

Going back to our Gospel: After Jesus has told the parable about the self-promoting *guests* at a hypothetical wedding banquet, he turns his attention to the real-life host of the banquet he is, at that moment, attending. Jesus says to his host: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..."

Jesus has switched from speaking about the right attitude of guests invited to a banquet to the right attitude of the host doing the inviting. He says that hosts must not seek or expect *any* advantage or reward in exchange for inviting people to a meal. If a host gets something in return for inviting someone to a dinner –

either honor, or the favor of some powerful person, or whatever – then it is an act of reciprocity, not a gift of grace. It is *quid pro quo* – getting this for that. Jesus spoke of such reciprocal giving earlier in Luke’s Gospel, when he said, “If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” (Luke 6:33)

Yet, my friends, our whole society seems based on giving and expecting return! It’s called the “market economy,” and its not a **bad** way to structure a society’s economy. But on the *spiritual* level, relationships built on *quid pro quo* are deadly; for this is **not** how *God* loves, forgives, or grants mercy and grace. God loves us not because of what we have achieved; God loves us because God **is** love, and it is impossible for God *not* to love us. Yet we humans are so **steeped** in a marketplace, *quid pro quo* mindset that we think **God** works the same way. “God will love me **if** I do such-and-such or **if** I *refrain* from doing such-and-such.” We have even allowed this *quid-pro-quo* mindset to form our most common explanation of how it is that Jesus’ death saves us: “Our debt of sin was so great that we could never repay God that debt; so Jesus, whose life was of infinite worth, payed the debt on our behalf.” It makes total sense to a marketplace mindset: Jesus gave his life in return for God forgiving us. We find this “atonement theory” everywhere: even in our hymns and our Prayer Book. But as Richard Rohr and an increasing number of Christian authors have pointed out, this is seeing the cross as a *transaction*, and it has nothing to do with forgiveness, mercy or grace.

Now, my friends, I know all of this in my head; but when it comes to living it out in my own life, I keep slipping back into a mindset and habitual way of living in this world in which I try to shore up my ego, seek approval or affirmation, and judge others by whether or not they meet some unwritten standard of “worthiness.” I keep slipping back into what Richard Rohr calls the “calculative mind” – counting costs, rewards, merits, demerits, deservedness, worthiness. And yet, today’s Gospel insists on a *different* mindset, a different way of thinking and living – one based on unmerited grace and love. As David Lose writes, “Jesus’ whole life is centered on inviting into the presence of God those who neither expect nor deserve such an invitation. And he expects us to do the same. He expects us, that is, to stop counting the costs, benefits, and rewards of our actions and live from a sense of abundance and blessing.”³

Jesus lived according to a different mindset: the mindset of the kingdom of God. And that way of living was so unpopular, it got him crucified. My friends, it is hard to remain centered in a kingdom of God mindset in this world; a *quid-pro-quo* mindset is in the very air we breathe. In our marketplace world, it is so easy to imagine that “this-for-that” is the *right*, the **only** way of thinking and operating.

And I admit that my default way of operating in the world is in unconsciously desiring to bolster my ego and receive the affirmation, recognition, and the approval of others. Yet it only shores up my False Self; and my False Self will

be of little help on that day I myself enter Hospice, having only a short time to live. For we cannot take our false selves into the next life.

And so, to be able to live within the kingdom of God in a marketplace, *quid-pro-quo*, ego-centric world requires constantly, intentionally bringing ourselves back to the mind of Christ, most often through some form of discipline – regular prayer and worship, Bible or other spiritual reading, study, retreats, and formation. One of the reasons Christ Church exists, one of the great gifts Christ Church has to offer to this community and our world, is to assist you in those efforts to maintain, or return to, the mind of Christ. My prayer is that we all, in this new year of Formation which we begin next week, might be formed, more and more, into what C.S. Lewis called “Little Christs,”⁴ and that the kingdom of God may grow within and among us.

AMEN

- 1 Shai Held, “Aiming high and falling low (Proverbs 25:6-7; Luke 14:1, 7-14),” *The Christian Century*, August 29, 2019
- 2 David Lose, “Freedom to Stop Counting and Start Blessing,” *In the Meantime*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-15-c-freedom-to-stop-counting-and-start-blessing/>
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”
— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*