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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 1, 2019
12th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 22/Proper 17/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14
Sermon Title: “Entertaining Angels”

Theme

Jesus observes guests jockeying for position at the table. He uses the opportunity to teach his hearers to choose humility rather than self-exaltation. Jesus also makes an appeal for hosts to mimic God’s gracious hospitality to the poor and the broken.

Text

¹On 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.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon

About the Gospel Reading for today, I am curious as to why Jesus was invited to the house of the "leader of the Pharisees" in the first place. By the fourteenth chapter of Luke, his relationship with the Pharisees was already contentious. And his relationship seems only to worsen by his continual pointing out of the errors of their ways, as in this passage. But he is the Messiah and God incarnate whether they recognize that about him or not.

On this occasion, Jesus was observing the other guests arriving and finding a place at the banquet table. In his day, and in ours too to some degree, proximity to the most important person in attendance is the desired outcome, so all the guests contended for a position near the head of the table, where either the host sat and/or the most important person at the banquet.

Do you remember when the Sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to Jesus and said to him:

^{35b}"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

You see, even among Jesus' own disciples, they knew that proximity to the most important person, in this case, Jesus their Lord, was the desired outcome.

I don't know how you are in situations like this, but speaking for myself, I would never presume that I am the most important person in any room, nor would I try to position myself closest to the most important person in the room. It has little, if anything, to do with this parable, I just prefer to stay aloof and unnoticed in most situations. I know there are people who need that kind of attention, and so I am willing to let them have it. As an aside, there is a colleague whom shall remain nameless, who in any situation where a bishop is present, has his nose up the bishop's ... alb. My colleagues and I know it. The Bishop even knows it. We just laugh about it.

Back to the Gospel Reading. Jesus taught that we are not to seek out positions of, what, glory, respect, esteem for ourselves. A better method of conducting ourselves

is to consider ourselves the lowest among those in attendance and then if glory, respect, and esteem are due us, it will happen. Jesus concluded that portion of the parable by saying,

11"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

But then, beginning with verse 12, Jesus gave some additional advice, and we have to be honest, none of us do this. He said

“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. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Now before the audience participation portion of this sermon, let me clarify that the poor in Jesus' day would likely have been considered those cursed by God, because in the ancient Jewish understanding of the way God works, people get from God what they deserve. And the crippled, the lame, and the blind that Jesus referred to would be those who were considered ritually unclean, and associating with them would have made all in their company ritually unclean too.

So now, let's just do a quick survey of the congregation. How many of you have pulled out the linen table cloth and fixed a sumptuous feast and then ... invited in a bunch of strangers who are poor, crippled, lame and blind? Even today, as a culture, we are much more accepting of people with disabilities, but we just don't invite strangers into our homes, do we?

Today most of us have a better understanding of people with disabilities and don't consider them cursed by God or unclean, but strangers are strangers and we are disinclined to provide a feast in our homes for them, disabled or not. Am I right? So there must be something lost in the two-thousand years that have since past, and between the two vastly different cultures of First Century Palestine and Twenty-First Century America.

But that does not mean we can simply throw this teaching out as irrelevant. On the contrary, Jesus taught us something about the value system of the Kingdom of God.

Yes, there may well be some there, who, while in this life, were faithful well-respected noteworthy people, but there will also be faithful people whom the ancient Jews would likely have thought of as unclean. And by *there* I am speaking of Heaven, the ultimate culmination of the Kingdom of God.

You see, throughout his public ministry Jesus gave all, but especially the poor a foretaste of the Kingdom of God in his feeding miracles. In those miracles, Jesus demonstrated how God, God's self will fill all with rich food and drink, and enough that the faithful will not only be filled, but there will be leftovers. That is just a little snapshot of the grace of God.

And throughout his public ministry Jesus brought wholeness and healing to the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In doing so he restored them to their families and friends who were forced to shun them and make them beg in the streets and not allow them to take part in worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. In bringing healing, they were allowed to return to their homes, and attend worship at the Temple and make sacrifice for the forgiveness of their sins – like everyone else.

In both the OT book of Isaiah and the NT book of Revelation, we are given an image of what the culmination of the Kingdom of God will be like in all its completed glory. We are led to believe that it will be like a wedding feast where no expense is spared, where the best food and drink is served without end. And in this place there is no tolerance for pain and crying; and disease and disability will be no more. There the faithful will be perfected and complete as God created them. It will be glorious and well beyond my ability to describe or your ability to imagine.

But wait, there's more. By Kingdom of God, we should be careful not to think it is limited to Heaven, as unlimited as Heaven must be. No Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God has come near, and is already here. So we don't have to wait for it. In fact, it is the faithful's responsibility to make it happen here and now.

So, when I say to you, all of you, "You belong here" I mean *all* of you, or as they say in the south, "all y'all"

- people who pretty much look and live like you and me,
- people who are from higher and lower rent districts than you and me,
- people who don't look like us,
- people who have disabilities,
- people who have different value systems,
- people who are well-employed and those who are unemployed or underemployed,
- people who are young and people who are experienced,

In fact, there is no one who is excluded. God revealed in Jesus Christ is the creator of all that is, so there really is no one who is excluded from God's mission to save the world.

So you see, we really do belong together. There really is no *us and them*, just *we*.

Paul wrote about that a bit in his letter to the Hebrews. To them he wrote,

¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Imagine, entertaining angels! For me, that would not be an incentive, but a bonus.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So let us do as Jesus urged us. Let us not think more highly of ourselves than we ought. And let us give others, all others, the benefit of the doubt, and invite them in, in here, in this house of worship, where we find God and maybe they will too.

And if we've entertained angels, well then we can be confident that they sent back a good report on our behavior while among us.

Prayer

Faithful God, in Jesus you show us a way of humility and hospitality with power to transform our world. Give us grace to love those whom you love, and do that

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which pleases you, and the courage to live to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen