

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16;
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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When I was an undergraduate in college, I lived in an apartment my senior year with three roommates. One was a close friend of mine – the apartment was divided into two bedrooms, so I lived with him, but to get the apartment we had to find two others to join us, and preferably someone with a really good housing lottery number.

Apologies for any nightmares brought back from the idea of housing lotteries.

We finally found two others, and the four of us moved into an apartment together about this time of year. A month or so into the semester, I received a phone call around 5 in the afternoon from one of the other roommates who I still didn't know all that well. He explained to me that he had invited a guest to stay with us that evening. We had a sofa in the shared space, and his guest would be sleeping there. It was short notice, but I didn't object too much. Right at the end of the conversation, he added one small detail:

“Oh, and by the way, John lives in the college woods. He's homeless.”

Now, if I were living my life with Luke 14 as my guide, I might have given up my own bed and slept on the couch. At the very least, I should have welcomed the man – who I'm here calling John – into our midst with open arms, serving him a well-cooked meal and attending to his every need.

But I didn't do any of that. And to be honest, I have to be careful about telling this story: when I mention that once, in college, I opened our door to a homeless man, well, that sounds like a great thing, and that's usually the reaction I get, until I finish telling the story.

In reality, when I received that phone call all those many years ago, I was just a little annoyed – not so much that he was homeless but that John was a stranger invited into a space I'd just myself begun to call home.

And so I failed: today, I couldn't pick John out from a crowd, and that was probably true a month or even a week after he spent that night in our apartment. What sounds like a great opportunity for radical hospitality was just that – but only somebody else, for my roommate who invited him in our midst. Not for me.

Now, the moral of this story is not that we should throw open our doors with abandon to every single person we can find, especially those who, to use the imagery from today's Gospel, might traditionally occupy the lowest place at the banquet table, if invited at all.

Yet in the passage we just heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke, that's what Jesus seems to be telling us in the Parable of the Banquet.

But first, we might look at what Jesus tries to accomplish when he teaches in parables.¹ When Jesus employs a parable, these stories often don't quite make sense to our ears: there's something just not quite right about them.

The parable of the sower: why would any so-called farmer scatter seeds so carelessly that only some of them fell on fertile soil – a rather large target – while many others fell on the path and on rocks?² The parable of the pearl: why would anyone sell all his possessions for a single pearl?³

We might attribute this discordance to time: well, we're modern and Jesus was using metaphors from thousands of years ago; whatever sounds odd is just an issue of time and place.

But to think that way is to discount the power of Jesus' rhetoric. Parables are meant to turn our world view upside down, and that's just as true today as it was in his age. These passages are timeless because Jesus is not giving us literal life advice, but rather teaching us about quite the opposite. From these stories, we are meant to learn how God is *not* like the world around us, how the Kingdom of Heaven is unlike our earthly life.

And that's a helpful view when we're given a story like today's, which is a bit more nuanced than some of Jesus' other parables. At face value, the parable Jesus tells us is a rather good guide to life, even if it's a bit peculiar. Reminding people to live a humble life, welcoming the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – these are all good things!

We might revise or augment that list a bit, given the difference of two thousand years or so since the author of Luke's gospel compiled this parable. We could imagine a banquet held for the asylum seeker, a child orphaned in the ongoing conflict in Yemen, a victim of yet more gun violence, and all seated at a table where *we* sit at the lowest place.

Yet something doesn't quite sit right with this parable. Jesus seems to be advocating that we seek the lower place so the host will *publicly* raise us a place of greater prominence. We are told to invite the poor and the lame for the *honor* we receive because such children of God in our midst cannot repay us for our actions.

Yes – Jesus tells us with clarity how God looks with favor upon those who do good things to the least among us, that we “will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous,”⁴ which is the only thing that truly matters.

But there's a trap here that maybe you've already noticed: what is our motivation for doing good?⁵

¹ For one recent discussion of Jesus' use of parables, see: Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 1-23.

² Luke 8:4-8 NRSV.

³ Matthew 13:45-46.

⁴ Luke 14:14b.

⁵ For a modern discussion on the morals of motivation, see *The Good Place* (NBC) S1:E11 “What's My Motivation” (though a viewing of all previous episodes is both necessary for context and commended for content and entertainment).

Is Jesus calling us to show hospitality to all, especially those who usually have no honor, while we place ourselves in the lowest seat, all because this is the right thing to do, or are we kind to the least among us so we can guarantee ourselves our heavenly reward, punch our ticket of sorts and say, “there we go, I’ve followed the formula, God will look with favor upon me?” Or worse: acting out of sheer obligation, as I did those many years ago in allowing John to share our apartment for a night.

Madeline l’Engle articulates this same trap in her self-reflecting journal *The Circle of Quiet*, where she writes: “The moment humility becomes self-conscious, it becomes hubris.”⁶

The focus ought to be on others, and not on us. The hard reminder in this parable, then, is walking that fine line between right actions towards others for their sake, rather than for our own benefit.

Thankfully, Jesus instituted the greatest example of how to walk that line, what a properly ordered banquet ought to look like – it’s what we’re doing right now.

In the Eucharist, we have a single place of honor, reserved alone for Jesus Christ our Lord. Though we come from many different positions in life, we come forward and kneel, shoulder to shoulder, at the same rail, and receive the same Body and Blood. We do so both in a place of great humility and great honor, unworthy yet beckoned by God with great love and urgency. And even though some of us are here wearing funny clothes, none of us are set apart above the rest; even the priest cannot celebrate the Eucharist alone, all of us here gathered are crucial invited guests to this feast.

When, in a few minutes, we gather to kneel at the altar rail, or have the Eucharist brought to you, or request God’s blessing to be pronounced over you, you might pray something like this:

Lord Jesus, show me the way to bring this banquet,
your lifegiving love,
into my life and out into the world
that all may see and know God’s embracing love.

Jesus calls us to order our lives so that “those who humble themselves will be exalted”⁷ with the knowledge that our actions “will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”⁸ To put it another way, the Letter to the Hebrews suggests this: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember 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.”⁹

Rather than seeing people as “others” and looking for ways to prove how we are better, even better by inviting others to a higher place, what if our instinct, our motivation for doing good, was like this: showing mutual love, imagining ourselves in their position. Picture a banquet like this, where everyone shuffles around, not wanting to seem more important than anyone else but instead valuing each other for their unique gifts, only to be invited by God to share an equal place at the table.

⁶ l’Engle, Madeline, *The Circle of Quiet* (Open Road Media, 2016), 7. l’Engle continues: “One cannot be humble and aware of oneself at the same time. ... Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or someone else.” Here, she’s referring specifically to the creative process, but the human condition is universal.

⁷ Luke 14:11b.

⁸ Luke 14:14b.

⁹ Hebrews 13:1-3.

This is the Kingdom of God – the way Jesus shows us through the parable of the banquet how God’s realm is unlike our own. This is the way we can take the Eucharistic Feast in which we are about to partake and live our lives Eucharistically.

This is a glimpse at what the heavenly banquet will look like, a place where God welcomes all, values all, loves all. It’s a banquet filled with people who could not possibly repay God, because who among us could begin to do so?

Jesus invites us to see the world the way only God can: as is true for all of Jesus’ parables, we are called to turn our world upside down and see the holy in each of us, made in God’s image, rather than how worldly society determines our place.

That’s radical hospitality, radical love – sustaining love that will feed us as we feed those around us.

Go forth from this holy place, and walk humbly with your God,¹⁰ so that all may know their place at God’s table. *Amen.*

¹⁰ Micah 6:8.