

Scripture:
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Unmeasurable Welcome

Lately it feels like the message I am called to preach is “Jesus turns the world upside-down.” I read it over and over throughout scripture. I see it in parables, in events, in stories and it is the loudest message I am hearing right now for our world.

It is true that we do not live in a world of empire like Jesus did. We do not have the same class standings or status. The ancient Palestinian world was one of honour and shame. Everyone had a place and a status and it was very hard to move from one to the other unless of course you became ill with a disease that might displace you, or your husband died and you had no family to protect your position. (then you might quickly land on the bottom rung of the ladder) Status was everything and the only way you might move yourself up was by doing things for people of higher status in the hope of great reward and honour.

We don't live in the same kind of hierarchal culture but most of us have systems we are in where we know our place, whether at work, in our family, in the wider community, or even at church. As ministers we quickly learn who we are supposed to please and who doesn't really matter. We know who we will never satisfy and we know the supporters that don't have enough clout for it to matter in the church family system. I've never been good at fighting for my status and so at this I usually fail miserably.

So along with the people of his time most of us are nodding our heads in the first part of Jesus' message. Don't overstep your place at the table. Some people get this and others don't. I see it in weddings often - the people who arrive early to get a “good seat” Problem is they are not always the ones who deserve the seat of honour, but some folks just expect it. As the minister I've had to move folks out of the family row at a funeral before (ugh). Today, we live in a society that has created ‘entitled’ people everywhere. Everyone believes they are and they deserve the best. And yet it would be horrifying to be asked to move back so that someone more important could have a seat - wouldn't it. On the other hand it would feel pretty good to be moved up a seat or two - or even to the table of honour.

Many of us get this kind of humility and some would even follow through with it.

But what if we really have done something spectacular for the host, or we are really good friends - well then we deserve to be at the table of honour - right? Well... Jesus is basically saying - “No” “the whole quid pro quo thing? That's not going to fly in the kingdom of God.”¹

Why doesn't it fly? Well because love is more important than power or prestige. Love is critical not status. Love needs to be at the top of the agenda of the event not honour.

Karoline Lewis asks “How do you measure or calculate repayment of love, of mercy? And the fact that we think we can is a rather striking theological problem. We tend to forget that our

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4700#comments> Karoline Lewis

beliefs about faith and discipleship are also claims about who we think God is. If we insist that our faith, our salvation, is dependent upon an equal rate of exchange between God and us, then we need to ask ourselves, in what kind of God do we believe? What happens if we don't measure up? And what makes us think we can assume certain systems to quantify the grace of God?"² Ministers fall into this trap time and time again. "I think this is one of the most poignant and perilous aspects of ministry -- that a quantification of our work might actually be the result of some sort of equivalency of effort: higher attendance, thriving programs, more money in the offering plates. So we work more and more, the proverbial 24/7 mentality, with the expectation that the church pews will be full, Sunday school will be busting at the seams, and our preaching will change every single life present on a Sunday morning.

And what is the result? We measure our worth based on models of outside evaluations and expectations rather than our inside and intrinsic incarnational presence and power." That's not faith. That's numbers that is the opposite of what is important in the church. Faith is not contractual. God doesn't love us more if we have our butts in the pews more Sundays than George next door.

We often create a quid pro quo faith, believing that God will honour and love us more if we just.... That is a slippery slope because if that is true than we have a lot of explaining to do to those who suffer with cancer, or mental illness, or live through a natural disaster or a war. If we expect God to move about in the economies we do we are all doomed. When we assume God will be in a better relationship with us based on our 'ministry performance' we are in real danger of workaholicism, depression, and anything but the healthy, abundant life God desires for us.

That is why although we might understand the first part of the story we have to continue reading to recognize what an 'upside-down' world Jesus requests of us. Jesus goes on to advice his host to invite not the people who can repay him, but instead invite the outcasts and undesirables. This is one of those times I am sure people started looking around at each other or at least staring at the ground thinking, I'm not so sure this guy is all together, he can't be serious.

This week I am in the midst of planning a big event. My parents 50th wedding anniversary was actually yesterday (we have a lot of family in town already and there are more coming in throughout the week). Next Saturday is the big party (well as big as us kids on a tight budget can afford :(- It's a good thing my parents don't hold us to the quid pro quo world because there is no way on God's green earth we could begin to repay them for all they have given us. And so, when I was making the guest list with my sister-in-law I didn't start going out on the street inviting folks in, and I didn't think through the people who perhaps have hurt our family along the way and put them in the place of honour. No way. This is a party for those who have been there through the thick and thin of life. And we are ready to celebrate them and all they are.

So I hope that doesn't mean Jesus is speaking to me... maybe he is - there is a family member or two that I'd rather not see (yes... even I have those members in my family). We did invite them though.

See, we know this message must be from God because it is completely absurd. David Lose writes "Jesus comes to Jerusalem not just to challenge the kingdom of the world, not to reform it, not to make it better. He comes to overthrow it, to put before us an entirely different way of

² IBID

being, a whole new way of relating to each other, and so pretty much everything thing he says about caring for each other with no regard for status or repayment makes absolutely no sense in light of the values of that day. Or ours.”³

“Let’s be honest. While the honour and shame dimensions of our culture aren’t quite as explicit, we’re still pretty conscious of our social status. And while we’d never admit to inviting persons to lunch or dinner from a sense of what they can do for us”⁴, if we are entirely honest at times we still keep track of what we owe and who owes us. At least we do in the church. I see it time and time again. People get upset when they get recognition and they get upset when they don’t. People will help those in the church who donate enough financially, but why would we help those who don’t? Those folks are not members - they don’t deserve the same status. Do you have any idea how many times a minister is in a ‘damed if they do, damed if they don’t kind of situation?’ So now, just as then, the thought of spending all that we have on and for people who can do absolutely nothing for us seems not just unimaginable, but more than a little bit crazy. And because it is unimaginable we have to watch the life and death of Jesus alongside the life we live and recognize what it looks like when one gives all that he has. A friend of mine shared an article with me this week that fit this story perfectly so I thought I’d share it with you. (It’s from Ask Amy - a U.S. Advice Columnist).

The relief and the reality for all of us is that God’s measure of membership in the Kingdom has everything to do with how God sees us and nothing to do with how others see us, or even how we see ourselves. Thanks be to God.

Life, Ministry, Faith, Church should never be about survival, it should never be about trying to ‘fit in.’ it should always be about life abundant, thriving, joyful life! because that is the very desire of God for every one of us. Christianity is about Life! We don’t live the life of disciples so that we can get approval, we live the life of disciples so that we and those around us can live more fully. Amen?

Amen.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/10/luke-14-7-14/>

⁴ IBID

ASK AMY

Trip causes hard feelings

Dear Amy: Every fall, my sister, cousins and a cousin's sister-in-law have a weekend shopping excursion in our home city.

We stay in a hotel, treat ourselves, shop for our children and go out for lunches and dinners. It is a great time to reconnect.

I have a sister "Wendy," whom we do not invite. She is offended to the point of tears when she finds we have not invited her. My two sisters and I are very close in age, but Wendy hasn't been as close to this set of cousins as my sister and I have been through the years.

We are all married stay-at-home moms. Wendy is a divorced, working mom with one young child.

There are several reasons we do not include her. We know she doesn't have very much money for such an outing. She also does not have many of the same interests as we do. We're all very active churchgoers, while she only sporadically attends services. Plain and simple, she does not really fit in with us anymore.

She takes it very personally, and last year even came over to my home unannounced crying about it, which upset my children and caused my husband to threaten to call the police if

she did not leave.

Now she barely speaks to me and has told our relatives that I am a horrible person (even though I've helped her).

How can we get her to understand that she should perhaps find another set of friends whose lives and interests align more closely with hers?

SAD SISTER

Dear Sad: First, let's establish that I agree with your sister: You are a horrible person.

Obviously, you can do whatever you want and associate with — or exclude — whomever you want, but you don't get to do this and also blame the person you are excluding for not "fitting in."

The only way your sister would ever fit in would be for you to make room for her. You are unwilling to do that, and that is your choice.

But her being upset is completely justified, and you'll just have to live with that. Perhaps this is something you could ponder from your church pew, because despite your regular attendance, you don't seem to have learned much.