

Circle of Mercy Sermon

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What are you looking for? (Luke 14:1-14)

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Jesus had a real knack for inviting people from the margins right into the center of the stories and events that he encountered in his life. He constantly pushed against the social norms of his day, and in doing so, he helped us see a little more clearly God's vision for the world.

God's vision for the world that Jesus preached about and modeled in his actions was not something off in the distant future that people had to wait for and expect as a reward for all their good work and efforts here on earth. Rather, over and over again Jesus tried to help the people around him see that God's hope for the world actually could be realized in the here and now, that it could be known and accessed in the ordinary, mundane, unexpected and often overlooked details of their lives.

He attempted to help his hearers understand what God was asking them to do and who God was asking them to be – not only in relationship to their external experiences of the world, but in relationship to the innermost parts of themselves. Jesus wanted to help the people see how the actual experiences and opportunities and needs of the people right in front of them transcended the external laws and

expectations of the world around them. In fact, the external laws and expectations of the world, more often than not, bound and blinded them, clouded their vision and paralyzed their actions, allowing them only to see things in one particular way, ultimately keeping them from seeing and living into the liberating and life-giving work of God in their midst.

In earlier chapters of Luke, we learned that Jesus had already begun to set his face toward Jerusalem, toward what we know (and maybe he did too) would likely be his death. Up to this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had been challenging a long list of social and religious norms of his culture, and since he already was heading toward Jerusalem maybe he knew he didn't have anything to lose.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Luke tells us that Jesus was on his way to eat a meal in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, on the Sabbath. Those who were with them were “watching him closely.” It is possible that the religious leaders were watching Jesus closely because they wanted to learn from him. But, I would argue that their suspicions about him had already been heightened based all the ways had already challenged social expectations and religious norms throughout his life and ministry. There's a good chance they were waiting – almost eagerly – for him to “slip up” and make a mistake.

A friend of mine, Eric Smith, a New Testament Scholar, makes an important observation about this story. Often we perceive Jesus in opposition to the Pharisees, rather than being in relationship with them. But in this particular story, Jesus is traveling with them to a Sabbath meal. Sharing meals in this historical time period implied relationship, respect and connection. Sharing meals was one of the things Jesus did most often. Therefore, Jesus was probably headed to a meal with people he was close to, with people he had a relationship with, with people he knew well.

And, if we think about our own relationships with the people we are close to, the people we know and who know us best – aren't those the very relationships where we have the capacity to experience some of our deepest disagreements and arguments? Aren't those the places where we find it easiest to air our grievances or just wait for the tiniest misstep so that we can pounce with great self-satisfaction – saying “I told you so” or “I knew you were wrong about this” or “I knew how much trouble this was going to cause”?

Let's keep this in mind as we continue with the rest of this story...

It was curious to me that the lectionary left out five verses at the beginning of this chapter, so I asked Amanda to include in her reading all of the first fourteen verses. Jesus was walking with some lawyers and Pharisees on the way to a meal at the home of one of the Pharisees on the Sabbath. As they were walking, there was a man in front of them who had dropsy – commonly known as edema – a condition of swelling caused by excess fluid that becomes trapped in the tissues of your body.

Rather than walking by the man, Jesus turned to the lawyers and Pharisees who were walking with him, and asked, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” He was met with silence. No one responded to him.

So, Jesus went ahead and healed the man and sent him on his way. He then turned to the lawyers and Pharisees and asked them if one of them had a child or an ox that fell into a well on the Sabbath, would they not pull it out of the well? Again, Jesus was met with silence. Not one of them replied to his question. They just continued to watch him. Maybe this became one more arrow in their growing quiver of evidence against him. We don’t really know.

So Jesus, the lawyers and Pharisees continued on their way to the Sabbath meal.

When they arrived at the meal, the tables suddenly turned. *Jesus* began watching *them*. And what he noticed was how the guests at the meal quickly chose and moved into the seats of honor around the table.

As he watched this unfolding, Jesus launched into the parable about how, when invited to a banquet, one should not choose the highest places of honor, but instead should choose to sit in the lowest places. That way, the host might come to you and say, please join me in one of the seats of higher honor, rather than you being humiliated by being asked to move to a lower position at the table in front of everyone. Basically, the message was: don't think of yourself as higher than you actually are.

In the following verses, Jesus turned his admonition toward the hosts of the party. He instructed them that next time they gave a luncheon or dinner party that they should invite not just their friends and neighbors who could repay them, but they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who could never repay them – that their reward will come later on, down the line.

It would have been pretty hard for the hosts of the party who had been walking along the road with Jesus, who witnessed him stopping to help the sick man he encountered along the way, to miss the fact that he was talking directly to them. In many ways, they had created this situation. They made the guest list. The guests who had been invited to the meal were jockeying for the most important seats at the table. In their culture of honor/shame; they were competing to place themselves where they would be noticed; they were playing the game of social status; they were counting the costs of what it would mean for themselves if they ended up in a seat regarded as “lower status” at this particular meal table.

Taking these two parts of Jesus’ parable together, I think he might be trying to tell us two important things. First, in Jesus’ culture, honor and shame were particularly highlighted in social gatherings - where people were or were not invited to go, where people were or were not allowed to be. Jesus was asking them to reconsider their understanding of these very social norms and practices. We actually need the part of the story that the lectionary skipped over – because in it, Jesus was telling us that in our pursuit for noble and worthy things, we have to pay attention to the people who cross our paths on the way to those noble and worthy things. If we fail to do this, we miss the point entirely.

Second, in Jesus' culture the elite leaders (both religious, political and social) held a great deal of power. Jesus was asking them to reconsider how they made use of that power – how they might liberate everyone (including themselves) from the elaborate and elitist game of social gains and rewards – how they might stop counting the costs and rewards of their actions that served only to maintain and increase their own social standing – how they might be released from the prison of what everyone else thinks, that has held them captive for so very long. Here too, the verses left out by the lectionary are essential because, as Jesus named in the parable, those we pass by and ignore are the very ones who need to be invited to the feast.

The thing is, this is not an old message. The message of this parable does not have an expiration date. Jesus' observations are true for us too. We live in a culture that entices us believe that scarcity is the reality, rather than abundance. We live in a culture that persuades us that our safety and well-being depend upon maintaining our place at the very front of the line, with all of the privileges that entails.

It is a normal, human desire to want to be elevated and recognized, to receive the perks that go along with having the best seats at the table. This desire begins at an early age.

My height and limited eyesight usually meant I got a seat near the front of the class when I was in school. This was especially true in elementary school, where seeing the board was a necessity. I actually enjoyed sitting at the front of the room.

My seat placement didn't really come with any special privileges, until one day, in first grade. You see, I attended the same elementary school that my parents attended. We sat at desks that had probably been used there for several decades before me and my classmates had even been born. They were the old wooden desks, with an opening underneath, where you could stash your books and papers and pencils. They were painted in primary colors (probably full of lead). When you chipped off the paint, you could see the multiple layers that had been added over the years to make them appear to be "newer" than they actually were.

One day, when we arrived at school, all the desks in the first two rows had been replaced with brand new metal, wooden desks (the same basic form as our old desks), but without the layers of paint chipping off; and brand new plastic and metal chairs. I walked over to where my old desk had been, and there was a piece of paper with my name written neatly on it and taped to the top right corner of the desk. I sat down, arranged my books and papers and pencils underneath it.

Class started as usual that day. But, when recess time arrived, I made my way over to the group of friends I usually played with on the playground. My best friend at the time refused to talk to me. I tried to figure out why, to no avail. I had no idea what had happened that would make her not talk to me.

As it turned out, my best friend, who was always a bit taller and who had much better eyesight than I did, was always relegated to one of the desks at the back of the classroom. She thought it was completely unfair that everyone at the front had received new desks, while no one at the back received a new one.

Now, I have to admit, I really liked my new desk. I wanted my friend to have a new one too, but, I didn't want to give up mine. I didn't suggest that the teacher rotate the desks around to make it fairer. My friend didn't get a new desk that year.

Many years later, when we talk about this we laugh – mostly. In the grand scheme of things, I admit that this is a pretty insignificant moment. However, it probably holds more significance than I recognize because when I think of first grade, this is *always* one of the first memories that comes to mind. There was something that

felt really good about being in that special group at the front of the class who got brand new desks. While, at the same time, there was something that felt really awful about knowing how my friend felt about not getting a new desk too.

Such experiences follow us through elementary school, middle school, high school, college, our life work, our careers, our retirement and beyond – many of which have much higher stakes than the situation with my new desk in first grade. We could probably spend a good hour or two talking about these kinds of moments we've all experienced at one time or another – times when we have benefited in one way or another, as well as times when we have been on the outside/ignored in one way or another.

Even when try our best not to do so, we are enticed and tempted by the desire to be perceived as the best, by the craving to be recognized for the position that we hold, and by the longing to receive the privileges afforded by what we think we have earned or that we deserve.

And how we respond in these moments, ultimately, is determined by what it is that we are looking for: Are we looking out for ourselves? OR Are we looking for ways to extend and enlarge the circle of who is included or excluded? Are we

looking out to maintain our place in the social hierarchy? OR Are we looking for ways to bring about the kingdom right here, right now? Are we looking for ways to keep things just as they are, for our own comfort? OR Are we looking for ways to embody and share God's abundant love for us with each other?

This past week, several of us were present for a retreat at YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, for some of the women who are incarcerated at Swannanoa Women's Prison and their teenage children. We have done this retreat on several occasions. It is a day set aside for the women and their children to be able to spend time together in a setting outside the prison – talking, playing games, eating plenty of good food and snacks, and enjoying just being present with each other.

What strikes me at every single one of these retreats is how the children – no matter how old they are – are there to see their moms, who they love. Their moms may have disappointed them. Their moms have committed crimes for which they are now serving time in prison. Their moms don't get to see them very often. But their children show up to spend the day with them.

Without fail, these days are some of the most tender and loving moments I've ever witnessed among mothers and their teenage children. The children and mothers

embrace each other, laugh together, hold hands, share full and delicious meals, make cards and bookmarks for each other, get their pictures made together, shed tears with each other, and spend their free time doing simple things like just looking at each other's toes – comparing how they are the same or different, scratching their children's backs or playing with their children's hair.

In many ways, I think the teenage kids and their moms at these retreats embody just what Jesus was talking about in this parable. Even though the teenagers' hearts have been broken, probably more than once by their moms, and even though they have every right to be angry, they take their moms by the hand and lead them right to the front of the line. As the day progresses, many snuggle up more closely than I've ever seen any teenager snuggle up to their mother in public.

At the end of this year's retreat, one of the moms said to all of the kids as we gathered in a circle with them, "You kids don't have to worry about us. We are okay. We take care of each other. We look out for each other. We are in a good place, so please don't worry about us."

After some of the teenagers departed, I was talking with a few of the moms. They were talking about privileges that they have within the prison – how they work up

to certain levels to earn the ability to have a day pass, to work outside the prison, to get to go to a retreat like the one they had just completed, or to go to other special events. One of the women in the group shared that she had just gotten a job outside the prison, and she said that she had asked that someone else be given her spot on an upcoming retreat to Camp Mundo Vista. She was getting other opportunities to be outside the prison, and she wanted other women to be able to do the same. She didn't want to take up all the spots.

Another mom said that she wished she wasn't in prison, but that the close relationship that has formed between her two children may never have happened in the same kind of way if she were not in prison, and that she was so grateful for the beauty of how they take care of and look out for and love each other.

In an environment where scarcity and counting the costs of everything are the norm, there are these kinds of moments when this group of women, are instead choosing to live out of a sense of abundance and generosity.

At the end of the day, I suspect that this may be at least part of what Jesus was talking about – that we are being called to recognize that the kingdom is already

right here with us, and we have the capacity right now to recognize and experience it.

Jesus' invites us to recognize the desires within us that make us grip tightly to maintain our status and privilege and to counter those desires by releasing our grip on what everyone else thinks about and expects of us. Jesus encourages us to open our eyes and our hearts and consider that God's desire for every single one of us is to know the wonder and beauty of God's abundant grace, mercy and generosity in this very moment, right where we are.

So, let's rub our eyes, blink a few times, and be ready to see what we've not been able to see before.

Amen.