

September 1, 2019

Proper 17

Luke 14: 1, 7-14/Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

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When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. These are often mentioned in the Gospels and Hebrew Bible. They are also metaphors of the human condition that none of us can deny. Well, we do. But we all know something about feeling poor or crippled or lame or blind. We all do.

And when YOU give a banquet, insists our Gospel today, invite those who are poor, crippled, lame, blind. Literally and metaphorically,

The story from our Gospel this morning is told as a parable in Luke.

A familiar phrase applied to many scripture stories, and certainly applicable to parables is a quote from Black Elk, a very famous Sioux Medicine Man. He was asked about stories from his tradition. "Are these stories true?"

He answered. "Well, I don't know if they happened exactly that way, but if you listen to them long enough, you will hear how true they are."

The same can be said of parables. Parables may not have happened exactly the way they are told, but if you listen to them long enough, you will hear how true they are.

Parables may not be factual. But they are about true things. They are about what is possible. And once you see what is possible, reality changes with it.

Something else about the parables of Jesus. They are not about God.

We assume they are. And we look for who is playing the role of God in any given parable. But these stories are not about God. Even though some of our gospel writers lead us to think that is the case. But it is not.

Parables are about the kingdom of God. Not God. I think that is an important distinction.

Parables are about what the world, *this* world, could look like, would look like if we were to love one another with devotion and care and sought justice and compassion for everyone and everything. How prophets and mystics, Jesus being one of them, imagined the way God loves. That is the kingdom of God: what the world would look like if we truly loved one another. And ourselves.

The question then is not where is God in the story. God is everywhere. But where are we in the story? Where are our sympathies? Our loyalties? Where do we identify? Or what makes us squirm?

Parables then help us experience our own reactions to what is possible in the kingdom of God here, and now.

The kingdom of God is about *this* world, and not about heaven.

The last line of today's Gospel, "And you will be blessed and repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" might make us wonder about that. We might think that verse is a reference to heaven. But it isn't.

The word resurrection, *anastasis* in Greek, means to raise up. Or to stand up. Or to cause to stand.

And the word translated *righteous* is better understood as meaning just.

So, I suggest the ending verse of this Gospel would more helpfully read: "And you will benefit because you stand up for justice and cause others to stand up as well."

Standing up for justice and compassion and causing others to do the same makes a difference. Here. And now. This is the work of the kingdom of God. It is our work.

By the way, it might be a worthy practice when we come across the word *righteous* in Scripture to use the word *just* instead, and when we come across the word *righteousness* to use the word *justice* instead. And see what difference that makes.

All of Jesus' parables describe what is possible. Today it is an open table. We know its possible. We practice it here.

Some background on open tables in the first century world. There weren't any. With whom you sat at table reflected your social status and honor. In Jesus' day there were very sharp social boundaries, boundaries defined by purity. What was considered "clean" or "unclean," "pure" or "impure." Purity categories were social categories. They were categories of honor or shame. And the impure or unclean even though they were social categories and not hygienic still carried notions of contamination and contagion. So, it was strictly taboo to mix the clean and the unclean. This applied across the social, religious, and political spectrum. And at table.

The poor, the lame, the crippled, the blind were considered "unclean." For Jesus to say to his hearers, you invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, the blind to the banquet, not just to lunch but to a banquet, was scandalous. And offensive. It was socially aberrant and tantamount to illegal.

Purity still pervades how we see others. Look at the way we treat immigrants at our borders. And literally making them "unclean" because of our abuse and neglect and inhumanity. The way we treat immigrants is about purity. And the way we continue to moralize about the LGBTQ communities. This is about purity. And the way some talk about Muslims as if they are a threat, is about purity.

And Ethnonationalism. This is about purity writ large. It is important that we recognize what is really behind ethno-nationalism – a topic that we hear quite a bit about today -- is really *ethnic* nationalism. It is based on the premise, on research, that we really do get along better with people who look like us. And the "us" amongst proponents of ethnonationalism is white America. Ethnonationalists claim self determination. Don't be fooled by this. It is about purity. And let me

underscore, it is the ruling elites, be they political or religious or social, that define or shall I say contrive what is meant by “purity” for any given culture.

The Gospel today turns the tables upside down on what is considered pure or impure. It eliminates the category.

Jesus says when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the lame, the crippled the blind. To your table. Share the banquet with them.

This invitation, this proclamation, was boundary shattering in the first century world. Jesus’ action was considered socially disruptive. It shook loose the taken for granted social norms. And called the question on who set those norms and why.

Purity was not the lens through which Jesus saw any of us. Or the world. What he saw was what the world would be like if we loved as God loves. God’s love, he insisted, is not about purity.

Be not surprised that it was Jesus’ Table Fellowship as well as other things he said and did that got him in trouble. Jesus’ Table Fellowship had political consequences. And ultimately contributed to getting him executed.

Now, let me say something about our table here. And about our liturgy. Our worship. Liturgy means the work of the people; a public work. In ancient Greece the liturgy was defined and I quote, “as a public office or duty performed by a rich Athenian”! We have come a little way since then.

Our liturgy, our work together, is a public work by the people. Here we make a public statement about what is possible when we act with justice and compassion: an open table. Where everyone is welcome. Everyone. There is no more equal a playing field than at an open table.

Our liturgy then is political. Political.

I know some of us may say don’t bring politics into Sunday morning, let us just meet and eat in peace. And that is the point. Here we meet and

eat in peace at an open table. We practice open table fellowship. Everyone is welcome. Everyone.

Some churches don't have open table. Some places require baptism or confirmation or pledging – membership has its privileges. Some churches require that you believe certain things. And they claim this is to protect the integrity of worship and the integrity of the Eucharist or communion or the Lord's Supper. But for us the integrity of our worship and table is our openness. You are accepted. You are welcome. By us. By God. Yes, in this case, we speak in the name of God. You are accepted by God. And loved by God. Believe it or not.

If you are hungry, literally or metaphorically, there is nourishment for you here. If you long with hunger and thirst, come and take and eat. The journey is great. Come and take and eat. There is a place for you here. And here we are all equal.

There is no "us" and "them" here. We are all in this life journey together. It's almost cliché to say we are all deeply interconnected and our fate is interconnected. But it is true. It is dominations systems, then and now, that create ideologies that separate "us" from "them," the "clean" from the "unclean." The kingdom of God has no "us" and "them."

That is my conviction. You will decide for yourselves.

Your being here this morning is personal and intimate. You are also part of a public work. A public statement of our view and value of humanity and our understanding of Gods love in and for this world.

An open table is possible. It happens here. Because of this, we know the kingdom of God is at hand.

And there are more possibilities to come.

Do not lose heart.

