

Sermon 8.28.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Proverbs 25:6-7 | Psalm 112 | Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 | **Luke 4:1, 7-14**

Most of the parables that Jesus told dealt with important topics and deep spiritual questions, but this morning's reading kind of sounds like a *Dear Abby* advice column.

Dear Abby – I mean, Jesus,

I just got invited to a dinner party this weekend at a Pharisee's house. I haven't had a chance to see the guest list, so I have no idea where I should sit – closer to the host in the VIP seats, or further away at the less important places. How can I pick my seat with confidence?

Sincerely yours,
social climber

Dear Social Climber,

At events like this, it's better to err on the side of caution, rather than looking for seats in all the wrong places. It would be humiliating if you sat too close to the host and then had to move to the other end of the table when someone more important arrives. Instead, *start* at the end of the table. Everyone will see how humble you are and when you're invited to sit higher up, you'll look important and impressive in front of everyone there. And that's what matters most, isn't it?

Your servant,
Jesus of Nazareth

At one level, that's exactly what this passage seems to be about: manners and etiquette. When Jesus walked the earth, it was customary during meals for the more important guests – usually people who were wealthy or powerful – to sit in the places of honor, closer to the person hosting the meal, while less important guests sat further away. Seating arrangements showed where someone stood in the cultural hierarchy, what their rank and status was in comparison to everyone else. It would have been absolutely *humiliating* to pick a seat and then be told by the host to move down when someone more important showed up. So Jesus was offering some good common sense wisdom.

If this all sounds like a weird thing for Jesus to talk about and a strange topic for a sermon, if it seems pretty juvenile and reminds you of the high school cafeteria, you're right. It sounds like a funny thing to care about, but Jesus said these things because while he was eating at a Pharisee's house, he watched as all the guests tried to sit in the most important places, jockeying for position to show everyone how important and impressive they were.

And if what you gather from this reading is that Jesus is calling us to be less prideful and live with humility, then that is good and fantastic. But there is more to his words than just that. Jesus was trying to tell the people there – and trying to tell us, so many years later – about what God's kingdom is like, because it is drastically different from the way the world operates.

Let me explain. See, a few weeks ago I got a phone call from a number I didn't recognize. I still picked it up, just in case it was important. And when I said "hello" the recorded message kicked in, telling me all about the *amazing, exotic, all-expenses-paid* vacation that I had won for me and a loved one. Have you ever gotten one of those phone calls? They're just like those emails I get from Nigerian princes who want to give me their fortune. I didn't listen for more than a few seconds, I didn't wait for any details, I just hung up the phone.

Why?

Because I knew there would be a catch. There's always a catch. I knew it was too good to be true. Growing up I learned the phrase, "there's no such thing as a free lunch," and this world has proven that to be true over and over again. It's the same reason I don't pay attention to the *amazing product that will change my life* for just three easy payments of \$19.99, but WAIT, there's more! It's the same reason I *do* listen when the announcer talks really, really fast at the end of car commercials. Because I've learned – as you've learned – that in this world you don't get something for nothing, that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is, and there's almost always a catch.

It was the same in Jesus' day, and that's what he's trying to point out. Back then, if you were invited to the home – especially of someone who was wealthier or more powerful than you – you knew you would end up owing them something socially. That you were obligated to return the favor of their invitation with a party of your own where they were invited, that you were now expected to do something in return for their hospitality, like maybe be loyal to them or owe them a favor. An invite like that came with a catch, because no one did something kind without expecting something in return.

This mentality was illustrated during an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, when one of the characters receives a gift from his neighbor and says to her, "Why would you do such a thing?! The foundation of gift giving is reciprocity. You haven't given me a gift. You've given me an obligation! Now I have to go out and purchase for you a gift!" That's how this world works. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. I do this for you, you owe me. Quid pro quo. And this is so ingrained in us that many of us are *suspicious* of people who want to help us, and we look for ulterior motives in people who are kind, to the point where sometimes we don't accept help or charity from others because we don't want to feel like we *owe* them something.

That's the way this world works. But it's *not* the way the kingdom of God works.

When God gives, there's never a catch, and in *his* economy God willingly and lovingly gives *something for nothing*. That's what makes the kingdom of God so counter-cultural and different from this world. And it's why Jesus seems so threatening to some people. In God's kingdom, there is no hierarchy, and there are no better seats.

With God, there really is no catch. Jesus willingly humbled himself, becoming human and living among us, showing us how to live fully, offering up his life so that we could be forgiven, saved, and free. Jesus invites *you* to a banquet where he's the host, and offers you eternal life, the forgiveness of your sins, and the promise that God loves you.

And ever since Jesus died on the cross and rose again to offer us salvation, humanity has been trying to figure out what strings are attached, what we owe God, what we have to give in exchange for this incredible gift. We wonder: How good do I have to be? What rules do I have to follow? It sounds too good to be true, so what's the catch?

And there is none. God is the host at the heavenly banquet and he gets to invite whoever he pleases. There's nothing we can do to earn it or pay God back for it. God simply offers us love and forgiveness and salvation and new life, and we simply embrace it with faith and gratitude. There's no catch. In fact, God's kingdom is *defined* by God's incredible, gracious, unending, abundant generosity that is given without expecting anything in return and without any strings attached. It is, in every way, not of this world.

And this parable forces us to ask ourselves a question: why do we do what we do? Do we serve others, hoping that we'll get something in return? Do we do favors so that people will owe us something? Do we do kind things with the expectation that we'll get something back? Do we do good because we want recognition and admiration from the people around us? Do we make a big deal or show of our actions so that others will see and praise us? Be honest: how often do you choose your actions based on what you hope to get back in return? And how often do you give something for nothing?

For that's the way God's kingdom works, that's the way that Jesus works, and that's what following Jesus looks like. Giving something for nothing, serving without thinking about what we might get back, doing kindness without caring if people notice or we get credit, loving without thinking about what people owe us.

A few years ago a Polish archbishop met a homeless man in Sardinia, and he invited the man over for dinner. The homeless man refused the invitation, because he was too embarrassed by the way

he smelled and by his appearance. When the Polish archbishop heard why his guest wouldn't come to dinner, he decided to tell Pope Francis about it. And in return, Pope Francis gave instructions for a bathroom to be built for homeless people living in and around the Vatican. Three showers were built, a safe place for people to get clean and receive a change of underwear, a towel, soap, toothpaste, a razor, shaving cream, and deodorant. Every day almost 150 homeless men and women come in with nothing, and receive these gifts of love without any strings attached or price demanded or expectations held. That's the kingdom of God at work, that's God's economy, giving something for nothing out of love and joy.

It's the kingdom of God we saw during the Olympics in Rio, when New Zealand athlete Nikki Hamblin fell, taking down United States runner Abbey D'Agostino with her during a 5,000 meter race. This was an event both women had spent years preparing and training for, and as Abbey D'Agostino got up, she looked at the pack of runners ahead of her, considering how she might catch up, until she saw Nikki Hamblin collapsed on the ground next to her. No longer caring about rank or time or where she'd finish, she bent down and picked Nikki up. They limped forward together, until a few meters later Abbey's knee gave out. And so Nikki stopped to pick *her* up, and they limped toward the finish line together, finishing last. That was *God's* Spirit at work, encouraging two women who had never even met each other before to set aside their own dreams and hopes and desires in order to give without expecting anything in return.

That's God's kingdom. Something for nothing. No catch. No strings attached. Given *to* us in Jesus, and by God's grace, give *through* us to others. Amen.