



Sermon August 29th: God's Way – Humble and Hospitable

Prayer:

O God, I embrace your good words and warm spirit around me today.

Luke 14.7-14

Some years ago I had Presbytery responsibility for students for the ministry. The day came when I had a part in the Service of Licensing of a student at St Pauls Trinity Pacific. At the lunch following, I sat on one of the benches along the walls. I hadn't been there long when a woman approached me, 'Reverend, you must sit at the high table.' She took me by the arm and ushered me to where I must sit with the ministers.

While I have great respect for the culture and appreciated the honouring of the ministry, I had been very happy where I was – talking with a man who was a taxi driver.

For some people, being seated in a superior place is important.
You and I who know we are important to God are not looking for acknowledgement.

Some of you will remember our cat MacGyvor.
He liked to sit in the bean-bag in front of the television.
If I was sitting in the bean-bag, or Tim or Robbie were, that was fine.
If James was sitting in the bean-bag, MacGyvor would scratch and bite him until he moved.
Somehow MacGyvor had worked out where he fitted: he was below me, Tim and Robbie – but above James.

Some people and cats need to know where someone fits: above us? or below us?

What does God have for us?

Luke tells us,

'Jesus was invited to a meal with one of the leading Pharisees.' He writes, 'People were watching him closely.' Margaret wondered what they were watching for. Pharisees would be watching for him to put a foot wrong. Others would be watching him, for his loving way.

Luke goes on, 'Jesus noticed some of the guests were choosing the best places.'

There was an order of precedence at the table. The most important guests sat close to the host at the head of the table. Then they sat in order of diminishing importance down the table to the foot.

Evidently people were placing themselves well up the table.

Jesus told a parable.

'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place. It could happen that someone more important than you has been invited, and your host, who invited both of you, would have to come and say to you, "Let him have this place." Then you would be embarrassed and have to sit in the lowest place. Instead, when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that your host will come to you and say, "Come on up my friend, to a better place."'

Luke has more references to tables and eating than any other Gospel.

In this chapter, there are three feasting stories!

There was a tradition of teaching at a banquet.

We have it today in speeches, maybe some advice for a bride and groom.

What do we have here?

Jesus is offering some advice about table etiquette.

Margaret thinks it's touching, Jesus is concerned to help people avoid embarrassment.

Remember however, this is a parable.

Does Jesus seem to you to be a man who would be worried about table precedence?

When Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, was he worried about where they sat?



No. The parable points beyond, to something of greater importance.

It seems the issue of precedence was endlessly debated by the Pharisees.
They put themselves forward as men who meticulously observed the Law.
They prided themselves on their purity.
They saw themselves as close to God.

They looked down on people who had neither the time nor education to study the Law and live by it.

They claimed precedence as close to God over everyone else.

Through this section, Jesus is constantly turning things upside down.
He's associating with the wrong kind of people.
He's challenging Law being put above love.

Next month our General Assembly will meet at St. Andrew's College.
I feel concerned.

At recent assemblies, there has been a judgement of better and lesser Christians.
I pray this year, there will be an embracing of God's love for everyone.

Luke tells us,

'Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbours – for they will invite you back, and in this way you will be paid for what you did. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; and you will be blessed, because they are not able to pay you back.'"

Jesus knows how easy it is for a commercial way of thinking to intrude on our relationships.
If someone is generous to us, we look to repay him or her with a similar generosity.
And when we are generous we will expect generosity in return.

People will say –it's only fair.
Jesus is interested in more than fair.
Jesus brings us God's generous love.
Jesus bring us God's wonderful grace.

Jesus is saying:

Our relationships with one another are not commercial relationships, balancing the ledger. Our relationships are loving relationships, giving because we like to give, not looking for anything in return.

Margaret recalls such a relationship.

Elements of the story.

Of course we love our parents, children and friends, expecting nothing in return.

A few years ago however, I taught Tony, who was blind, fifth form English.

I read him Margaret Mahy's book, 'The Changeling.'

When the story was presented as a play,

I invited Tony to a meal and then I took him with my family to the theatre.

Perhaps because it was not appropriate for him to invite me to his place for dinner in return, there was a lovely sense of blessing about the evening.

How does the story end?

Jesus says, 'God will repay you on the day the good people rise from death.'

Do we have ahead a pay-back time in the after life?
Is our reward going to be in heaven?

I don't think the promise of a heavenly reward follows from what Jesus has been saying.

We are living out Kingdom values now.



We are embracing now the life of the Kingdom.
We are engaging in the eternal in the present moment.

Margaret came across a kingdom feast story, in Philip Yancy's 'What's so amazing about Grace?'

One of Jesus' stories about grace made it into three different Gospels, in slightly different versions. My favourite version, though, appeared in another source entirely: the Boston Globe's account in June 1990 of a most unusual wedding banquet.

Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal. The two of them pored over the menu, made selections of china and silver, and pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive tastes, and the bill came to thirteen thousand dollars. After leaving a cheque for half that amount as down payment, the couple went home to flick through books of wedding announcements.

The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailbox, the potential groom got cold feet. "I'm just not sure," he said. "It's a big commitment. Let's think about this a little longer." When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager could not have been more understanding. "The same thing happened to me, Honey," she said, and told the story of her own broken engagement. But about the refund, she had bad news. "The contract is binding. You're only entitled to thirteen hundred dollars back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party - not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blow-out. Ten years before, this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had got back on her feet, found a good job, and set aside a sizable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in down town Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken - "in honor of the groom" she said - and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters.

That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d'oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminium walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big band melodies late into the night.

We are all at the foot of the table and Jesus comes for each one of us saying, 'Come on up my friend to a better place.'

We are all equally important.

We are all equally loved.

We all enjoy a party.