

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 29, 2010
Pentecost 14
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 24:17-23
Psalm 112:1-10
Hebrews 13:1-8
Luke 14:1-14

Our gospel lesson from Luke contains two stories that do not depend upon one another for their meaning. Jesus is in the home of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath to attend a dinner party, where it just so happens that a man is present whose arms and legs are swollen.

The issue of Sabbath observance has already arisen twice in Luke's gospel (6:6-11 and 13:10-17), and tension has developed because of Jesus' approach to what Sabbath observance is supposed to look like. As everyone watches Jesus here to see what he will do, he heals the man and proceeds to explain why he does so.

In the second part of the story, Jesus and the other guests are at the table preparing to enjoy the fellowship of the dinner party. When Jesus sees how people are behaving, it provides him the opportunity to teach them. And the subject of his instruction here is not mere social etiquette. This is not some rehearsal of "protocol" for dinner parties or important social occasions. Luke has told us long ago that the subject of Jesus' remarks here is nothing less than the Kingdom of

God. The folks may all be "at the table." But Jesus opens a window here into the Kingdom, and allows everyone to see inside.

As he does, *we* are given a glimpse into God's Kingdom here, not just the readers of Luke's gospel. *We* are allowed to see how things really are in God's realm, not just those who were dining at the table of this respected and important leader. We are given insight into what it means to be a *guest*, and what it means to be a *host*. As such, Jesus' words here relate to us in our walk of faith just as much as they related to those who first heard them.

The text tells us in verse 7 that Jesus notices an interesting phenomenon. Many of the guests are posturing and maneuvering in order to try to sit near the host of the party at the head of the table.

Jesus sees this, and says, "don't act like that. Don't do that. Instead, sit at the foot of the table. Then when the host sees you he will honor you with a better seat."

The obvious lesson here is that life in God's kingdom is to be characterized by humility. But it cuts so much more deeply than that. Yes, we are to be humble. That is obvious. But we must also be constantly vigilant, *so that our humility does not become in itself a form of self-seeking.*

Picture in your mind for a moment an important wedding, party, or social occasion you recently attended. Now picture in your mind all of the guests arriving and scrambling for the back seats, anxiously looking toward the host and expecting to be called forward.

It's rather humorous, isn't it? Rather cartoonish.

But there is nothing humorous about Christian disciples who are self-seeking, who always have an ulterior motive or hidden agenda behind their actions that is designed to benefit them and not others.

Being humble is obvious. It's a no-brainer. But beware, lest your humility in itself becomes a form of self-seeking.

After speaking to the guests at the party, Jesus turns to the host.

Jesus says, "when you host a luncheon or a dinner, don't invite your friends, family, or rich neighbors. They will reciprocate and pay you back. Instead, invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind. Then at the resurrection, God will reward you."

From Jesus' words to his host here we get a second glimpse into the Kingdom of God. Kingdom people are *generous with their talent, time, and money. And they do so without expecting a return on their actions and good deeds.*

In Jesus' day, and in our own, hosting others is an occasion to show and demonstrate love, generosity, and well-being. But in Jesus' day (and in our own)

hosting others sometimes became an act whereby one person gained power over others and put them in his debt.

And most of you here this morning can remember a time when you received a gift from someone, a gift that seemed lavish and generous. But then you realize that the gift came with strings attached, and because it did, it became oppressive and turned the face of generosity very ugly.

Jesus sees through this, and says to his followers, "don't do that." Give your lives away, and don't attach strings to your acts of love and kindness. Instead, just focus on being a channel or instrument of God's grace.

This is the picture we have in Psalm 112. The image is of persons who love God, and whose love for God enables them to have a loose grip on their wealth and material things. Because of that, they share with others. They lend generously. They trust in God for their security.

And perhaps most importantly, they give freely into the lives of those who cannot repay them. Look at verse 9: "they have given freely to the poor, and their righteousness stands fast for ever; they will hold up their head with honor."

Be generous with your life. With your talent, your time, your money. But be on your guard spiritually, so that you do not fall into the trap of expecting a return on your good deeds, as if they were some sort of mutual fund.

And be careful, Jesus says, because hosting others can be a way of making others feel in your debt so that they will reciprocate and repay you.

But in the Kingdom of God, God is always the host. And guess who has been invited? You and me.

And guess who has not the slightest chance or ability to repay God? You and me.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, I remind you that Jesus is our loving host. He offers us his grace this morning, not because of what's in it for *him*, but because of what it in it for *us*.

And as you receive that grace this morning, something will happens to you. You will be empowered to go forth from this place and to treat others like God in Christ has treated you. And as you do, you'll discover something else. You'll find that the Kingdom of God has indeed drawn near.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.