

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 28, 2016
Pentecost 15
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6
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.

In the second part of the story, Jesus and the other guests are at the table preparing to enjoy the fellowship of a 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.

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' advice not to do that seems so obvious to us. But this particular culture was intensely sensitive to issues of status and recognition. Few things would be worse than to have a host ask you to move to a lower position at a social gathering.

But Jesus' main point here does not involve social etiquette. His main point surfaces here when he admonishes his listeners *not to take into account the social payoff or reward of their invitations to hospitality.*

Indeed, says Jesus, they should not invite to their homes persons who already respect them or who are in a position to reward their hospitality or invite them back in return. Instead, they should invite into their homes the poor, the sick, the socially undesirable, and more.

And here we get a glimpse into the Kingdom of God that Luke has been presenting to his readers. What Jesus admonishes his listeners to do here is essentially the same as what Jesus has been about his whole life: *inviting into the presence of God those who neither expect nor deserve such an invitation.*

And so, to this group assembled for this dinner party, Jesus says: *Stop counting the costs, benefits, and rewards of your actions and live instead from a sense of abundance and blessing.*

This admonition is a theme that runs through our Old Testament lesson, our Psalm, and our epistle lesson from Hebrews. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “Cast your bread upon the waters, soon it will come back home on every wave.”

The Psalmist speaks of the righteous and says that because they are generous in the lending, and because they have given freely to the poor, they confidently trust in the LORD and will not be shaken.

The writer of Hebrews says that by showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels without being aware of it.

And here in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says to these guests: *Stop counting the potential payoff of your investment in the lives of others, and just focus on giving your life away out of love for God and for others.*

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 happen 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, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.