

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Among the Losers”

Luke 14: 1-14

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Our capacity to know... to experience... to enjoy... to live from the grace of God, has everything to do with our capacity to see. To see ourselves and to see life clearly.

If we can see... If we can get lose from the blinders...with regards to ourselves and God... then there is a reality we can know and enjoy.

The problem is... seeing is hard and our capacity for self-deception ... is really significant.

We see what we want to see...

What feels best to see...

What we've been raised to see...

What's convenient to see.

I love the little “yes” and “no” question riddles... where all you can ask are yes and no questions. They betray our presumptions. Like this one, “Fred is dead on the floor. The only thing in the room with Fred is a bowl of water. How did Fred die?” I've seen intelligent people work with that riddle for hours... betraying all sorts of assumptions that affect what they're seeing. Fred drowned, right? Was the water poisoned?

The answer is simple... Fred's a fish. Only apparent if you're willing to question your capacity to see, the lenses you're wearing.

Jesus spent a lot of time dealing with this... Wondering if folks would have eyes to see and ears to hear... suggesting all the time that seeing isn't so easy. He speaks in parables, like he did today... because the basic function of a parable (in terms of its literary form) is to disorient you... to wake you up.

“Why do you say everything in parables?” he was once asked. **“So that seeing they will not see and hearing they will not hear.”** Or because... **“I want them to scratch their heads... I want to nudge them off center.”**

Sometimes he nudged... often he shoved. He was a walking parable, like in the story that precedes today's gospel reading. It takes place at a party and for Luke's readers, ancient and contemporary, that should sound all sorts of alarms.

Banquets and parties and meals... are all central to Luke. After the resurrection... in Luke, the Risen Lord is seen only during a meal, around a table--**“while they're sharing the bread,”** Luke says, winking at the early church and us today.

In these chapters of Luke... there are parties and meals going on all the time.

Remember, what happens in the next chapter, in Luke 15. Jesus tells three stories about lostness.

There's a lost sheep

and a lost coin...

and there's even a lost son.

Every one of the stories ends the same way... with a great party and the one who is at the center of the party is the one who is lost.

The stories are about lost things and lost people... and about whether or not a person can see their lostness. Two brothers—one sees; one can't.

And when folks can't, then Jesus has to nudge... or shove... pull some parabolic rabbit out of his hat so they'll see. That is what happens at the beginning of chapter 14.

Let me set this scene for you and update it a bit borrowing a page from Robert Capon (a contemporary, Anglican theologian).

Jesus had been invited to a very posh dinner party at the Smith-Downings. There he is, sitting around this huge oak table with fifteen of the wealthiest people in town. We're talking old money here. There's a really big chandelier and the china is the very finest that money can buy. The atmosphere is pleasant but a bit stuffy.

There's a lot of polite conversation about gas prices going through the ceiling and the latest news from Iraq... and the new restaurant going in downtown, that sort of thing.

They've just finished the shrimp cocktail and the servants are bringing on the pheasants, when Jesus overhears Oliver Dun sitting next to him complain that all this food is going to reek havoc with his peptic ulcer. Well, when Jesus hears that, he stands up and clangs his water goblet with his spoon.

“May I have everyone’s attention. Old Olie here is suffering from a terrible ulcer and I just hate the thought of him not being able to enjoy this fine meal. So if it’s okay with your guys, I think I’ll just work on him a minute. Let’s see if I can heal him.”

Well, there's this contagion of gasps and mumbles all the way around the table. The women are fanning themselves and saying things like, **“Well I never”** and **“The nerve!”** But before anybody can do anything to stop him Jesus has put his pheasant on the floor and he's sliding the arrangement of roses over and he yanks Oliver up on the table by the lapel of his tux.

“Give me a hand someone,” Jesus yells, **“And make sure his feet stay out of the asparagus. I’ll want some of that when I’m through here.”**

No one's ever seen anything like it.

Jesus is rubbing Oliver's big belly and saying some mantra and shouting out...

“Breathe Ollie... breathe.”

The Smith-Downings are mortified and have turned as red as the expensive wine they were pouring. Mrs. Jonas-Walker Smith leans over and says, **“I’d rather die than have that happen at one of my parties.”**

Do you have a feel for the scene now? It's not just that Jesus is healing and healing on the Sabbath which violates those obscure Sabbath laws... His crime is against civility. He's attacking appearances.

Remember, this is a culture where cleanliness and etiquette are right next to godliness. They're offended by his bad manners... and assume they stem from bad theology and unholiness.

Then Jesus goes to confronting all these blushing bluebloods. After he heals Oliver, he figures he's ruined the party anyway so he goes to preaching. **"I don't know what you're so upset about... if one of your kids or even a pet was hurting, you'd do the same."**

"And as long as I have your attention... I noticed how all of you hurried in here to get the places of honor..."

"And as long as I'm being insulting... I noticed that you, Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Downing, only invited folks who could return the favor... nice going. Ever thought about inviting someone who just needed the meal... maybe someone poor or lame."

So... that's the parable that just happened, and there's no question that Jesus did it intentionally. He's at the table with folks who do not see... not themselves and certainly not the way things are.

Identities all bound up in distinctions.

"We're here and they're not..."

"We're in and they're out..."

"We're good and they're bad..."

And, my gosh, suggesting you invite... losers to sit at the same table is ridiculous. **"How would we know who we are if everyone gets to come and enjoy the pheasant?"** They aren't just hungry for pheasant... and good wine. They want... they need to think of themselves as different.

It's so human. I was watching a DVD a few weeks ago... the history of Sing at Baylor. It's a big deal for those who've never seen sing. Did you know there was a time when they stopped ranking for a few years... 1st, 2nd, and so on? No more of that.

They brought the rankings back... because people stopped caring; quality went down. It wasn't fun if you couldn't win. If there was no chance of being above.

It's so human... at least in our brokenness to look for how we're different, above, are better. And we all do it... even in church. **"Ah... those silly fundamentalists, those liberals."** We all do it because if we don't we'll have "a crisis of distinction" as Walter Wink calls it... We won't know who we are without the lines in between us.

Well... on that day Jesus had had enough... and decided to wake up a table full of folks who could not see themselves at all. And after he had their attention, he told them the parable we heard. A man prepared a banquet—invited lots of folks—and here came the excuses.

Did you hear the lame excuses? He's throwing this great banquet... a wonderful party with all the trimmings. But apparently, folks don't know how wonderful it is... they can't see.

Did you hear the excuses?

"I can't go, I just bought some land and I've got to go see it." At night? And why go see it after you buy it?

"Ahhh... ummm... I just bought some oxen and I need to take them for a test run." Yeah right, you've got to do that now... at night.

“Um... I just got married and I’ve got to go home to my bride.” Oh sure, at night... well, that one’s a little better. But still pretty lame... like The Little Mrs. isn’t going to let you out of the house. Like that’s likely in a first century patriarchal culture.

There’s no good excuse... they just don’t see, not themselves and not the wonderful opportunity before them. No one came... they got the invitation and threw it into the pile of junk mail with all the Time-Share Announcements and New Credit Card Applications and Flyers from Steinmart.

So... the Party Thrower, who refuses not to celebrate and share the celebration, sends the servants out and invites the losers... The lame and the blind. The poor. Those who sin and sin boldly. Outsiders of all kinds.

They’re out there... a couple of them peeling the lid off of another cold can of “Pork and Beans” ready to dig in with a two plastic forks. Then they hear it echoing down the alley... an invitation to the big house. **“Hey... anyone want to go up to the big house for a party. Everyone’s invited. There’s an amazing buffet, open bar, and a 12 piece band.”**

Of course, they go! And it’s too good to be true. Everything is theirs.

So, just like in Luke 15, here in chapter 14, the only ones who wind up at the celebration are the ones who are hungry for it.

They know they need it. They look down and see their pork and beans... they smell their “filthy rags.” And off they go. The ones who see-- make it to the table. The one’s who see--enjoy the party.

Those who know they’re hungry... get fed.

Those who know they’re blind... get led.

Those who know they’re empty... get filled.

Thomas Merton, in a book describing what a deep experience with the Divine is all about says, **“That it is a preference for emptiness.”** Meaning, I guess... only when we get to our essential emptiness... our real need... can we encounter the reality of grace.

And maybe... paradoxically... the reverse is also true. I can only see myself honestly, when I’ve encountered the grace of God.

Here... at this table... both can happen. Are you lost? Hungry? Are you outside the party? Are you “scratched?” If you didn’t say “yes” inside...

you missed the sermon

and the parable

and you’re going to miss the party.

Our capacity to know... to experience... to enjoy... to live from the grace of God has everything to do with our capacity to see. To see ourselves and to see life clearly.

Come here today and see yourself... broken, scratched, accepted, beloved as you are. And come here today, and see the banquet that life in Christ can be.

He is the bread of life... the cup of our salvation. Come... you’re invited and you are in need... Come, take all of it.