

Weekly Devotional Guide

This week we will focus on Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God and the value in living contrary to societal norms. Instead of aiming for the lifestyles of the rich and famous, Jesus is calling us to a life of humility and servanthood.

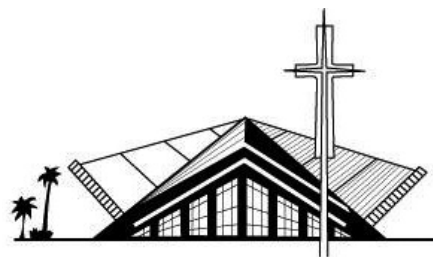
Monday: Read Luke 14.1, 7-14. As Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, why is it important for him to eat at the home of the leader of the Pharisees? He certainly was aware of the ulterior motives of the Pharisees!

Tuesday: Imagine that you are one of the invited guests in Luke 14.7-9. Pay attention to Jesus' tone of voice and facial expression. How are you reacting to Jesus' advice? What are you feeling? Why?

Wednesday: Read Proverbs 25.6-7 and Luke 14.10-11. As Jesus harkens back to the wisdom of Solomon and you reflect on present day customs regarding choosing dinner guests, what observations might you make about human nature? How important is prestige and power—and spending time with the right people—to you and those around you? Is Jesus encouraging false humility or true sincerity that can only come from humble soul searching? On a scale of 1-10, how humble are you?

Thursday: In Luke 22.24-27, Jesus is confronting his disciples even as they are sharing their Last Supper together. The disciples' argument centers around their need to be great. But how and by whom is greatness determined? Read Luke 14.12-14 and then Matthew 23.1-12 as you ponder this question.

Friday: As you have seen in our readings this week, shared meals at a common table are important opportunities for Jesus to demonstrate what being part of the kingdom of God really demands of us. From seating to guest lists, among other teachings, our notion of what it means to be successful in this world is challenged. How might you rethink your priorities?



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Lessons from Luke: Kingdom Etiquette

Sunday, August 29, 2010

Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor
Scripture Lesson: Luke 14:1, 7-14

There is nothing quite like the anxiety of planning a party at your home. You want to make a good impression. You want everyone to have a good time. You want everyone to enjoy what you serve. In short, you want everything to be as to be perfect, which adds to your anxiety.

Part of the anxiety of throwing a party is hoping that all the guests have fun and get along. We all know the anxiety that comes with inviting family members and friends to our house for dinner and hoping that Uncle or Aunt does not act obnoxious again and cause everyone to feel uncomfortable. We hope that insufferable friend of ours does not offend anyone with their opinions about politics or religion that they always seem to bring up at the worst time.

I believe the chief Pharisee in our text for today understood this kind of anxiety. He threw a dinner party at his house on the Sabbath. And he invited, of all people, Jesus, this teacher from Nazareth that was causing all kinds of commotion and controversy with the religious leaders. Makes you wonder why he was invited to the party. We don't know who this chief Pharisee was. Maybe he just wanted to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt and invited him as a sign of peace. Maybe.

Whatever the reason for the invitation, the text says they were watching Jesus closely, hoping he was going to behave himself. They were hoping he wasn't going to go on and on again about hypocrisy or repentance or make the guests feel guilty again about the poor. Well, it didn't take long. As soon as the appetizers were passed, Jesus saw a man at the party who needed healing and healed him right then on the Sabbath. Jesus knew the Pharisees did not approve of healing on the Sabbath, but he did it anyway.

Well, Jesus' party fouls didn't stop there. Jesus was just getting warmed up. He then turned to the guests and began lecturing them about how they chose the best seats at the party – how they wanted to look important and clamored for the most honorable seats. The Pharisees rolled their eyes and thought, "Here he goes again. First, he offends us. Now he is insulting our guests." Jesus told them they were doing it all wrong. He said why clamor for the best seats and risk being disgraced when told to move from the best seat to the worst seat. Instead, choose the worst seat and you will save embarrassment. You may even be told to move to a better seat... "Whoever exalts themselves will be humble and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted."

This is a bit unrealistic, don't you think? Who doesn't like the best seats? You go to a baseball game and they tell you to sit in the seats you have. But you know as well as I do that people don't do that. If they see seats closer to the field that are available, they will casually find their way down and sit there. And I have to admit when I am at the Rays game I often admire those seats right behind home plate, real cushiony, people come and serve you food. I'd like to be down there. I've seen people try to sneak down there, but they have folks that look like flight attendants on guard and they quickly tell them to go back to their real seats. And they get up, ashamed and go back to their ticketed seats. They did not pay for those seats. They didn't earn those seats. They told to go back where they belong.

When I am getting on a plane, I always admire the first class seats, especially for the long flights. You arrive at the gate all stressed because you've been stripped and searched. They call for you to board and you walk right passed the relaxed folks sitting in first class. They are reading the paper and enjoying their coffee as you walk to where all the cattle sit – in coach. The flight attendant closes the curtain that separates you from first class – yep, you're cattle. They tell you not to use the restroom in first class – yep, you're cattle. We all want the first class seats.

Al Tompkins told me recently that he was on a flight with a father and his twin boys from Africa. The boys were about five. It was their first flight. When they boarded the plane, the boys were all excited and they ran up the jet way. Dad following behind. The first class seats were not filled up yet, so the two boys jumped in the first class seats and said, "Daddy! Look these waters are free." Before the father could tell them that those were not their seats, three business men gave up their first class seats so the boys could stay in first class. The flight to Atlanta was about an hour. Flight attendants got in on the act and treated them like VIPs with cookies, coke and chips. When it was over the father thanked the men who gave up their seats, but said, "I am a little worried. I don't know how I am going to tell my boys that our fifteen hour flight to Nairobi in coach is not going to be like this!"

Who doesn't want the best seats? Who doesn't want to be recognized and treated important? And here is Jesus at this party telling guests not to pick the best seats, but instead choose the worst seats, the ones no one wants, the seats where nobody

important sits, the seats that are never recognized, where you can't see a thing, where people are served last? Jesus tells us to take those seats and let someone else have the better seats – "Whoever humbles themselves will be exalted."

What is Jesus talking about here? Is he giving some shrewd Dale Carnegie advice? Act humble and people will think you are wonderful and will recognize you. People like humility, so even if you are not, act like you are and you will end up smelling like a rose. You know people like that. It is a bit nauseating. Like the football player who says in an interview that it is not about money. It is about the team. Then you read in the paper that he went to another team who offered him more money. Is Jesus really advocating this kind of shrewdness?

No, not if you look closer at the text. When Jesus says, "Whoever exalts themselves will be humbled and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted" he is not talking about the praise of the world, the praise of people. The words exalted and humbled are not things that any person can bestow on another person. Only God can humble or exalt. So, Jesus is talking about humility here, but not in the way that you and I define it. Jesus is talking about being humble, but not in the way we think. We tend to think humility is about thinking less of yourself, having a low opinion of yourself, being the doormat to everyone and everything. For Jesus, that is not humility. When someone is truly humble, they have no concern for the praise of people or the world. Their only concern is the only praise that matters: God's praise.

You see, humble people don't exhaust themselves clamoring for the best seats, and the best status. Humble people don't seek recognition. Humble people spend their time and days seeking only God's applause. Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness to God. This is the only success that really counts."

Have you ever wondered what it means to be faithful to God and please him? Have you ever wondered what it is exactly that makes God give applause? Well, Jesus is all too pleased to tell the folks at this dinner party what brings God's applause. After addressing the guests, he then turns his attention to the host and he does not tell him it

is a great party and he loves the shrimp cocktail. He has some advice for his host too. I think it is safe to say that Jesus was never invited back to this house.

Jesus tells his host that he doesn't think too highly of his guest list. Jesus tells him that he invited all the wrong people. Jesus tells the host not to invite people who can return the favor, who can recognize you by also inviting you to their parties, don't invite the rich friends and family. Don't invite those you are supposed to invite. Instead, Jesus says, invite those that are never invited. Invite those you would not be caught dead with at a party. Invite those who could never repay you. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the outcast, the marginalized, the weak, and the oppressed. God will be pleased with that!

Jesus is talking about hospitality here, but not in the way we usually think of hospitality. We think hospitality means having a few friends over on a Friday night. We think hospitality is writing a check to someone in need, donating a few items to the homeless. Those are good things, but no hospitality. No, hospitality in this text means inviting the homeless, the weak the marginalized to your house, to your table, to your place and sitting with them eye to eye, heart to heart, spirit to spirit, connecting with them. Hospitality means "love of a stranger."

A few years ago a friend of mine was invited to preaching mission in Canada during the winter. He was to preach every morning and night for a week. The forecast called for lots of snow that week. On morning he couldn't open the door of his motel room. He was completely snowed in.

The host ringed his motel room and said, "I hate to tell you this, but we're going to have to cancel this morning's session. Can't tell about the evening. But things look pretty bad. In fact, I'm stuck in my driveway, meaning that I can't come down to fetch you. So I don't know what you are going to do about breakfast. But I do have an idea. If you can make it out of your room, walk down to the corner ... turn right ... go one block...you should be standing within shouting distance of the bus station. There's a little cafe in there. And if any place is gonna be open, it's gonna be open."

So my friend put on his jacket, busted out his door, and went in search of the little café at the bus station. He found it. And it was open, but it was also crowded. Every stranded soul in the universe was crammed inside.

Well, there was no place to sit. But some guy moved down the booth and made room for him to squeeze in. Waiter came over ... big burly guy ... non-shaven ... wearing half the kitchen on his apron. "Whatcha want?" he snarled. My friend asked, "Can I see a menu?" Waiter replied "Don't need no menu. Didn't get no deliveries this morning. All we got is soup." Friend said, "Well then, soup it is."

So the soup came in a rather tallish mug. Looked awful. Shade of mousey gray. My friend half-wondered if that's what it could be, cream of mouse soup. So he didn't eat it. But he did use the mug as a stove ... cupping his fingers around it ... warming them on it.

The door of the café opened once more. And a woman entered. Thin coat. No hat. Ice crystals in her hair and eyebrows. Maybe 40. Painfully skinny. Men moved over to make room for her at another table. "Whatcha want?" shouted the guy with the greasy apron. "I'll just have a glass of water," she answered. "Look lady," he said. "We're crowded in here. We don't give no glasses of water. Either you order something or you leave."

Well, it quickly became apparent that she wasn't able to buy something. So she rebuttoned her coat and started to leave. But then a funny thing happened. One by one, everybody at her table got up to leave, too. Followed by others ... at other tables. Even my friend (who still hadn't touched his soup) got up to leave. "All right ... all right," says the soup master. "She can stay." And he brought her a bowl of soup. And my friend turned to the man seated next to him and asked "Who is she? She must be somebody important." The guy replied: "Never saw her before in my life. But I kinda figure if she's not welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Soon all you could hear (for the next few minutes) were soup spoons clinking against the sides of the mugs. Even my friend broke down and ate his soup. He said it actually tasted pretty good.

Later on back at his motel, he still couldn't make out the taste of the soup, but he felt as if he'd had it before. But he couldn't remember. For the life of him, he couldn't remember. Then it hit him. Strangest thing, really. That cream of mouse soup tasted, for all the world, like bread and wine. That soup in that café with all of those people tasted for all the world like bread and wine (story told by Dr. Fred Craddock).

Let those who have ears to hear, hear. Amen.