

Turning Tables

At first glance, today's reading seems to be two separate and distinct things. And yet, we all know Jesus is famous for his non-answer answers. The first seven verses tell the story of Jesus going to the house of a Pharisee, excuse me a LEADER of the Pharisees for a meal. Which means he's been summoned by the local leadership so they can check him out.

It even tells us in the first verse "they were watching him closely". Ick. Invited to a dinner party that's actually more of a performance appraisal. No thank you.

We are then told there's a man with dropsy. I thought dropsy was when you keep dropping things, another way of saying clumsy, but after some research I learned the following – dropsy, in the time of Jesus would be someone with an abundance of fluid, swollen ankles, abdomen, etc. Today that would be called edema and a possible indicator of congestive heart failure.

I would imagine edema is uncomfortable, if not downright painful and the man with dropsy was standing before Jesus. We do not know if he had asked for help, but with dropsy it would be obvious that he was unwell. Jesus asks a simple question, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?' (Luke 14.3, NSRV) and his response from the Pharisees is crickets.

Jesus has turned the tables on the Pharisees. They invite him for dinner with the intention of observing him, possibly criticizing or questioning him, and Jesus questions them instead. It's interesting that they do not answer. Is it because they don't know the answer or they are afraid of being judged by the one whom they were just judging?

The subject of working on the Sabbath has been a point of debate throughout the very beginning of Sabbath or Shabbat. For orthodox Jews it means no engagement of labour at all. They shall not drive cars, operate electricity, including elevators, cook food, etc.

Some hotels in Jerusalem are equipped with a Shabbat setting whereby from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday the elevator will stop at every floor enabling an observant Jew to get where they need to go without having to press the elevator button.

The literal translation of Shabbat or Sabbath is "stop keeping". It means to rest from one's labours and not engage in work. More on this later in the sermon.

Turning tables...

In the next section Jesus makes an observation which he turns into a parable. In some ways it reminds me of where folks sit in Church. For some founding families, those who attend know who belongs to that pew and would never dare to sit there. Most of us sit in the same pew or at least in the same general area. Creatures of habit, I'd guess, yet also a sense of the familiar.

How many of us, when attending a multi-day workshop, select our seats on day one and continue to sit in the same seat throughout the workshop? I have to admit I've become one of those people that likes to change things up. And I know that's not the "norm" of these things.

Jesus is speaking to those present at the dinner party, about the same sort of thing. Before we get to that, I want to ask a question – has anyone here ever been asked to move from where they were sitting? I have. In a Church.

I was relocating from Brantford to Cambridge and I asked my Parish Priest in Brantford if he could recommend a Church similar in style St. Mark's the one I was attending in Brantford. He gave me a couple of recommendations which I, of course, did not write down. Both Churches started with a "J".

So, on a bitterly cold Sunday morning I headed out to check out St. John's Church. I went to the early service because that was the one where I was most familiar and comfortable. I arrive about thirty minutes before the service begins, and sit in my favourite place, seven pews from the back, right hand side, on the end.

It is worth noting this was after I'd been greeted by the priest who welcomed me warmly and told me to be seated anywhere.

It was a trap.

A lady who was very well dressed, wearing a very large hat, tapped me on the shoulder as I was praying. "You can't sit there," she told me, sternly. It is worth noting that there was no one else in the Worship space at that point. "Oh, I'm sorry" I muttered and gathering my things I moved to the opposite side of the aisle.

About five minutes later she came by again. Stopped beside where I was sitting and said "You can't sit there", again very sternly. I was flustered, stammered an apology and stood at the back of the Worship space, wondering if I had the correct Church and whether I should make a run for it.

The priest arrived to begin Worship and told me, with a broad smile, "Please feel free to sit anywhere". I opened my mouth but decided not to say anything and sussed up the twelve people who were seated. I sat behind them in the second to last pew. All went well until it was time for Eucharist.

Folks seated on the left side went up to receive communion, turned left at the altar and returned to their seats. Folks on the right side went up to the altar, received communion, then turned right and disappeared down a short hallway that brought them back to the right side of the Church.

I was the last one to receive and had been watching carefully. I received the wafer, and the cup, then went to the right, down the short hallway and back to my seat. Exhaling a sigh of relief, I thought the worst was over.

It was not.

The finely dressed lady in the big hat got up from her seat, sighed loudly, walked to the short hallway door and looking at me, slammed the door shut. Apparently the last one to receive Eucharist is supposed to close the door.

- Worship finished, I bolted from my seat, shook hands with the priest who invited me to stay for a Parish breakfast. Rather than telling him I'd rather stick pins in my eyes, I made an excuse and fled, never to return again.

Many years later I was chatting with the priest of that parish who noted that they had many people who came to the early service, yet they only ever attended once. I told him my experience and he was shocked. Which, in turn, shocked me. How could he NOT know?

All of this to say, this experience deeply influenced how I greet people when they come to Church, especially for the first time. I know we have favoured places to sit, but I cannot think of a single person from either congregation who would have behaved the way that lady did. I refer to her as the "Wyf of Bath", from Canterbury Tales because she was, indeed the most pious – just ask her, she'll tell you.

Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet, that one should never choose the place of honour unless one wishes to be moved by the host, causing great embarrassment. Rather, one should choose the lowest seat in order that the host may move them to a seat of higher esteem.

In Verse eleven Jesus says "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He's encouraging those present to stop viewing the world as though they are the centre of it, rather that they have a supporting role in another's cast.

The final section is especially fabulous because it includes the kinds of characters that would make the Pharisees uncomfortable. At one time, they may have been referred to as "the great unwashed" – which is to say "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind". They are to be invited, suggests Jesus, because they cannot repay a luncheon invitation.

Pharisees were one of Jesus' favourite sparring partners because although they, as a sect, chose to separate themselves from the rest of the believers,

they made the most noise about being holy, and judging all they considered unclean or unholy, yet they themselves, did not practice what they preached.

Often Jesus referred to Pharisees as hypocrites.

For Jesus, being a good and noble person meant helping those who could not help themselves, not because they would "owe you one" but because they couldn't pay you back. Jesus was about the dignity of every human being including orphans, widows, the poor, the addicted, the sex workers, the great unwashed masses. For Jesus it wasn't about "talking the talk", it was about "walking the walk".

Helping someone because it was the right thing to do. Putting the needs of others before your own needs. Which gets us back to the question of Sabbath. Stop keeping. Sabbath is meant to be a time where no physical activity occurs – no work, no labour. Today that would mean to take a day away from work, yet also away from laundry, housework, errands; and simply have a day of leisure...a day of choice.

Y'all are aware that I have a new role with the Diocese of Kootenay. I am the Regional Dean of the East Kootenays. I had planned to meet with my colleagues throughout the East Kootenays this summer and that has not happened, mostly because of the number of funerals I've been juggling.

The Ministry and Personnel, or M&P Committee has asked me to make a list of things I am prepared to hand off because they recognise that I can't continue to do all things I have been doing and take on a new ministry. So this is where YOU come in. In the next month or so I will be looking for people to volunteer for three new Committees. Hospitality, Visitation and Prayer Life. If you are interested in any of these please let me know. If you know of someone who would be a good fit, please approach them and let me know.

There is so much to do and so much more that needs to be done. And I don't have enough hands, fingers or hours in the day. As the Rev'd Agnes Scott, Deacon is fond of saying "When God asks you to take on a task, the only answer is 'I WILL'. Please be prepared. I will be asking for your help, and I pray your answer is "I will."

Yes, you will be doing me a favour, yet you will also be embracing a new ministry where the reward will be a job well done. There will be training available for all three of these Committees, and I will be speaking about each of them in the coming weeks.

Remember the words of Jesus "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Take on these things, not because it's what Jesus would have you do, but because it is the right thing to do. Your reward may not be much on earth, yet your reward in the next life will be "out of this world!"

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.
Let the Church say, "Amen!"
Amen.

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Sermon for Pentecost 12 – 28 August 2022
Luke 14.1-14