

Sermon Pentecost 12C
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Luke 14:1, 7-14 1On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. 7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” 12He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

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Do you ever get the feeling you’re being watched? As a parent of little ones, I can tell you absolutely, yes. I always have to check for little eyes and little ears so I can catch myself before I do or say anything that shouldn’t be seen or overheard. Or either I just have to elevate adult conversations into the stratosphere of circumloquacious vocabulary in order to safely convey any sensitive content. But in general, these days, we’ve all had to become more comfortable with the idea that someone might be watching. Whether it’s doorbell cameras, security monitors or tik-tokers filming, the likelihood of being “caught on camera” is ever increasing.

And some of the impulse to catch everything on camera is to keep people accountable, to stop bad actors from “getting away” with things... but also to encourage bystanders to do the right thing if they see something going on that shouldn’t be happening. And it may be getting excessive, but it also can be a reminder that when we’re out and about, even if we don’t realize it, and our actions (or inaction) may be making an impact on others around us.

Even in Jesus’ day, before video cameras and surveillance footage, it seemed that somebody was always watching... Today’s Gospel says that “when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.” As word spread about Jesus, the miracle-working rabbi who taught “as one with authority,” people began watching him closely. Some to learn, others to decide if he was truly from God, and others to try to catch him doing something wrong.

You see, nobody likes it when things change, especially religious people, right? (Oh you wouldn’t believe some of the comments we’ve been hearing about renovation process!) But that’s what Jesus did, he came in and shook things up and instituted change. He changed the way people thought about God. He changed the way people thought about one another. He changed the way people thought about heaven. He changed the way people thought about sin. He even changed the seating charts at this carefully curated dinner party!

“They” weren’t the only ones watching closely. The reading says goes on to say that while they were watching him, “HE noticed how the guests chose the places of honor” at the table... ..and so he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host... ..But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”

To our ears, this teaching may come across as a lesson in manners. Like “offer your seat to someone else,” or “wait to be seated until the host invites you.” But in a strict honor-shame culture, like 1st-century Israel, hierarchies of honor and rank were crucial, people felt, to the proper organization of society. A person of honor had a duty to take their place in the seat reserved for them, to preserve order. And likewise, someone of less social standing had a duty to take lower place. That’s just the way things were. So suggesting that the guests personally invited by the leader of the pharisees to intimate Shabbat dinner walk right by their place at the table and sit down at the foot, or the suggestion that you not reciprocate the invitation of others who have recently invited you to their party, were not just casual recommendations. Roles were to be respected and repayment was to be expected. These teachings constituted a radical upending of social and religious norms.

Why? Why did Jesus care who sat where at the table dinner party? Why did he always have to go around changing everything, why couldn't he just accept things the way they were? Well, for Jesus every moment was a teaching moment. He knew that whenever he walked into a room, people were watching. He knew, when he opened his mouth, everyone was listening. The Word of God was on his lips at every moment possible. And the topic was usually the way things are in the kingdom of God. Everyone knew the way things were, or at least the way they were supposed to be, in, in this highly structured society. But our rules don't govern God's reign.

In God's reign, those who humble themselves will be exalted. In God's reign, those who exalt themselves gain no higher standing in the kingdom. In everything that he did and everything that he said, Jesus took the opportunity to “turn the tables” (so to speak) on the situation, to point out God's truth, God's way, And today, the Kingdom Value on Jesus’ lesson plan is Humility. Putting others before yourself. Putting the community before the individual. Over and over again, Jesus tries (sometimes with more success than others) to impress upon his hearers that humility, not rank or status or approval, is the mark of greatness in his kingdom. “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted”

Such a great nugget of wisdom. Such a memorable line. Such a great teaching on humility... although doesn’t it kinda sound like in the end, humbling oneself isn’t the goal... ..but just a means of ultimately being exalted? Kinda confusing, right? I thought we were just supposed to be content with being humble...right? So is it true humility if you only do it in order to be exalted? Or is it really giving with no expectation of repayment... when you expect to be repaid in heaven?

Well, maybe Jesus knows humanity well enough to know that we aren’t likely to give something up without assurance that we’ll receive something in return. Maybe the promises of heaven are just what we need to keep us on the straight and narrow... ..Or maybe it’s that the “exaltation” Jesus is talking about is something different than just getting a better seat at the table. Maybe being exalted in God’s kingdom looks less like what the world calls “reward” and looks more like...Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of God, showed us exactly what humbling oneself looks like when he went to the shore to call fishermen to be his disciples, when he spoke God’s unpopular truth in the synagogue when he welcomed children and blessed them and he healed lepers and forgave adulterers, and in the end, took his place “high and lifted up,” not on a throne, but on a cross. THIS is the kind of exaltation Jesus is talking about. THIS is the kind of reward Jesus shows us to expect. The kind of blessing that comes

with willing obedience to the Father. The kind of freedom found in giving all the Glory to God. The kind of joy that comes in lifting up others, in effecting positive change for the good of ALL. The kind of exaltation Jesus offers is not self-serving but self-giving.

Today is Rally Day: the day we kick off and celebrate our education ministries and fall programming. A perfect day to remind ourselves of WHY we do what we do and WHAT exactly we're all about here. Today is the day our littlest saints begin their first foray into Christian Education, and our teenage saints begin to learn about what's in store for them this fall and our older saints start asking themselves what they want to dive into this fall, or how they can plug into our children and youth ministries.

And so it's a great day for Jesus to remind us that everything we do Everything we teach, everything we plan everything we organize...everything we build is not about reinforcing our own rules, it's about God's way. It's not about our success, but about the good of all, It's not about bettering ourselves, but betterment of others, not about "biggering" ourselves (to borrow a term from Dr. Seuss) but about building up the kingdom of God ..So that the word about town (and the hubbub of heaven) is that THIS is a place where we follow Jesus' example. THIS is a place where only seek exaltation in the Jesus kind of way.

The theme for our Rally Day today is "Rejoice" So I challenge us to think about joy in the context of today's lesson. Where do we as Christians find joy? Is it only in what makes us happy? Or could true joy be found in making others happy? What's the difference between self-serving joy and self-giving joy? and how does this church show that? There is a word in the Sanskrit language whose meaning is roughly translated to "vicarious joy" "Mudita" is the sense of happiness you might feel Seeing someone else experience success. It's the joy found in watching children learn something new, the joy experienced in an act of kindness that makes someone else's day, the joy of witnessing someone finally get a place at the table, the joy of Jesus in saving his children from the weight of sin and death.

The heavenly paradox is that there is joy in the cross Jesus' true joy is in us, his children. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Jesus' way of loving and healing and feeding wasn't just a sacrifice, it was his joy. Obedience to the Father wasn't just his burden it was his joy. And of course the passion of Christ, undertaking willingly for our sake, was painful, was heartbreaking, was real. The way of the cross is not without hardship. But in it there is joy. As Dietrich Boenhoeffer calls it, "costly grace," not cheap grace.

Just as they were "watching Jesus closely," the world is watching us. Maybe to criticize, maybe to hold us accountable, and maybe to learn: What does the life of a disciple look like? What do Christ-centered relationships look like? What does a healthy yet humble church look like? We've got a lot of celebrating going on here: We're inviting folks to join us for Rally Day, Soon we'll be pulling the construction signs out of the yard. We're advertising our Rededication Sunday September 11th. When folks "come and see," what are they going to find? Self-serving programs, or self-giving joy? What are they going to hear? Self-serving language? Judgment? Or folks building up others? Building up our community?

This Rally Day, remember we are all teachers. Whether we realize it or not, we are teaching others about the life of discipleship, the shape of the church. May we be faithful teachers, as faithful students of the Master, for all who come to this place to seek God's reign to see God's face and to hear God's word.