

Luke 14:1, 7-14

September 1, 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

A couple weeks ago, upon my return from vacation, you got to hear one of the many stories of our family's journey to Glacier National Park. Well, you're in luck, because this morning you get to hear another. Prior to our departure we did the usual pre-trip planning many of us do looking online at activities offered and what people were saying about them. Also, we talked to folks who have previously visited the park and knew the lay of the land. One activity we knew we wanted to do was whitewater rafting and so we booked what would surely be an exciting, breathtaking trip down the Flathead River. As we had whitewater rafted before, in my mind this would be just another fun, scenic, safe and memorable ride in the great outdoors.

Soon we had our personal floatation devices (aka life vests) strapped around our torsos, an oar in hand, and were off. During the onset of our trip, the guide gave us proper safety protocol and indicated the river was running much lower than earlier in the season as much of the winter snow, which feeds the river as it slowly melts away, was all but gone. I was somewhat disappointed thinking the ride may not be as eventful and exhilarating as I had hoped for. In time, we were into the section of river in which the rapids were located and traversed our way through each one with the guide doing his best to methodically steer the raft into each rapid so as to make some of the frigid water leap into the air and onto those of us in the boat. One after another we worked our way down the river until a seemingly innocent rapid lay before us. The guide turned us into the rapid and just as quickly as the raft and rapid collided together I found my reasonably calm and safe journey suddenly upended as I was flung out of the boat and into the 60-degree crystal clear waters. When I finally realized what happened, I was fully submerged in the water looking up at the underside of the raft. Not an ideal place to be and I still vividly see the color and seams of the bottom of that raft. Thankfully, I was able to swim clear of the raft and the portable floatation device did its job as my cold body popped to the surface and the guide swiftly pulled me back into the boat.

Jesus does his own sort of upending in our gospel passage as he was frequent to do, showing up and turning the tables of life upside down. As is so prevalent throughout the gospel of Luke Jesus is sharing a meal. This time at the house of a Pharisee, a religious leader. We are not told the exact reason He is there, but the text does tell us "they

were watching him closely,” which given the way the word “watching” is used throughout Luke we can conclude they were watching for something they could use against him. Yet, they were not the only ones watching. Jesus’ eyes were also scanning the room and verse 7 tells us, “He noticed how the guests chose the places of honor.” This leads Jesus to once again take the role of teacher as He tells 2 parables that upend traditional social practices of the day.

The first parable speaks to the invited guests who were no doubt jockeying for the best position based on their status in society. In an honor and shame society status was everything. It caused one to be very cautious in this delicate dance of seating arrangements. Guests of honor were seated nearest the host and those of lesser importance were seated further away. Sitting out of place could wreak havoc for not only the individual’s well-being but for his family as well, especially if you took the spot of someone more noble and elite than yourself (negative impact) or if the host invited you to a more prominent spot closer to him (positive impact). Essentially, Jesus tells those gathered is that they should not get so caught up in status or the pecking order but rather humbly take the lower spot and wait to be invited upward by the host.

The second parable is addressed to the host giving the banquet. It was customary that when throwing a social gathering such as this, one’s guest list was created carefully in order that those invited would be able to return the favor in inviting the host to a similar function. It would be totally unacceptable and an utter shame against a guest not to reciprocate in such a manner. Jesus turns this very prominent social code of the day upside down too. The guest list, he notes, should first include those who cannot give anything in return, specifically naming the poor, crippled, lame, and the blind; all of which Jesus will encounter in Luke’s gospel, in some cases have table fellowship with, and in all heal and extend to them the invitation to join the great banquet that is the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ teaching had to sound ludicrous in an honor-and-shame society. It was all about giving and getting something in return. It was all about being seen with the elite and reaping the benefits. It was all about honor and favors and status. Why have such social gatherings inviting those who can give nothing in return? Why? Because as Jesus’ teaching and life reveal – this is the way God wills it. This is kingdom living. Jesus seems to be reminding the people of the great banquet they had been invited to during exile as spoken by the prophet Isaiah, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and

you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” (Isaiah 55:1 [NIV])

Is this not the same banquet he invites us to join in? Come to my table he calls us. You that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. You who think you stand outside the reaches of God’s grace. You whose lives have been upended due to illness, addiction, death, loss of a job, and now find yourself thrown outside of the safe confines of your raft and frantically swimming, scanning, and searching for a lifeline in frigid, chaotic waters. Come to my table, freely, unconditionally, humbly and receive grace upon grace. Catch a glimpse of the kingdom in which all are invited, all are fed, and abundant life is offered to all. It’s a kingdom many long to see in the world today – the poor, crippled, lame and blind. The imprisoned, detained, homeless, refugee, foreigner, and stranger among us – quite possibly angels among us as our text from Hebrews reminds us.

This is a text that challenged the honor-and-shame system of Jesus’ day and continues to challenge the same systems today that still exist – in our schools, in our workplaces, in society, and yes even in our churches. It challenges us to look at ourselves, as Christians, seriously and ask ourselves some difficult questions. What does being a Christian mean? How might being a Christian cause us to live out our daily lives differently? The good news of Jesus Christ often upends conventional wisdom. Frequently, he breaks into our calm, quiet, and safe spaces we have so carefully erected for ourselves and calls into question our very way of living as his disciples. Often upending all we know and the way it’s always been done.

In a sermon on this passage Pastor Will Willimon shares this story.

I know a church in a great city that found itself surrounded by the homeless who clustered around the church, sleeping on porches and porticos. The church struggled with their “homeless problem.” What should they do about the trash, the syringes that often greeted them on the church grounds on Sunday morning? Those who encamped around the church were a particular problem when the church had a program or dinner in the evening. Many felt uncomfortable and uneasy walking past the sleeping bags, the people hanging out near the building.

At the annual church dinner—a grand affair, catered, each table decorated with flowers, a guest speaker—there was particular uneasiness among many. But the evening went off without a hitch. Members enjoyed themselves; everyone agreed the menu was the best ever.

The pastor asked one of the oldest members to give the closing prayer for the evening, a woman who had been a member of the church ever since she was baptized as a baby. The fellowship hall, in which the evening was held, was even named for her parents.

She stood up and said, “What a wonderful evening we have had. What a blessing to be with so many wonderful church friends. As we go forth this evening, let us attend to the words of our Lord. We have heard so many fine thoughts tonight, but let’s allow Jesus to have the last word: ‘When you give a dinner, don’t invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, instead, when give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind. And you will be blessed.’ Amen.”

It was a fine evening until Jesus showed up, [upended] and turned the tables upside down. That’s what we does.¹

¹ Will Willimon, *Will Willimon’s Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 47, No 3; Abingdon Press, 2019; p. 30.