

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
September 2, 2001

“Poor, Crippled, Lame, Blind, Blessed”
Luke 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Over the summer we've been spending a great deal of time
in the gospel of Luke.
We've been following Jesus on a journey to the city of Jerusalem
and to all of the challenges that he will face there.
And as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, all along the way,
he is preparing his disciples for their own journey,
a journey of ministry in Jesus' name.

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Today, we encounter Jesus sitting at the dinner table
in the house of a Pharisee.
Once again, it is the Sabbath,
and because Jesus has been known not to follow the Sabbath custom
the Pharisees are watching him closely.

Jesus sits at the table with the Pharisee and his invited guests,
and as he does he begins to notice things about the gathering.
Jesus would have been a good sociologist
(in fact, some might say he was the greatest sociologist),
because sociologists know that you can learn a great deal about a culture
by paying attention to the eating habits of the people:
what they eat, where they eat, with whom they eat
and with whom they make a point not to eat.
Jesus is paying attention to these things,
and he notices how the guests are arranging themselves at the table.

So he begins to give them advice about where to sit
when they are invited to a banquet:
do not seek the position of honor,
but sit at the lowest place at the table,
then your host may honor you, saying: Move up higher.
At first, it sounds like shrewd advice
for those who want to secure honor for themselves.
But the more we listen, the more we see that Jesus is up to something else.
As we listen to Jesus, we begin to get the slightest glimpse of
the kingdom of God,
where our social conventions are turned upside down,
where those who are least become the greatest,
and where those who humble themselves will be exalted.

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Then Jesus turns his attention from the guests at the dinner,
to the host,
and he enlarges our view of the kingdom.
When you give a luncheon or a dinner,
do not invite friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors
hoping they'll return the favor.
No – invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind
all those who, according to the common opinion of the day,
were down-and-out because of some sin they had committed
The poor, crippled, lame, and blind were not just viewed as unfortunate people.
They were believed to be sinners who had incurred God's displeasure.
So once again, Jesus aligns himself with the sinners,
the down-and-out, the marginalized, the outcast of society.
He tells the Pharisees to invite these people – these sinners –
to sit at the table with them,
even though they cannot repay them in any way, shape, or form.

As we consider this picture, we might expect
that it would be the poor and outcast who would be blessed in this exchange,
but that's not what Jesus says.
He says "you", the Pharisee, will be blessed if you do this,
because these guests cannot repay you.
They cannot repay you, but...
You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.
You will be repaid in God's future
You will be repaid according to God's all-wise, all-knowing plan,
and righteous plan

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Now we should be careful here not to pre-judge this Pharisee,
or condescend him in any way.
We should at least acknowledge that this Pharisee
has invited Jesus into his home – an action which, presumably,
Jesus cannot repay.
And at least
we are not told that the Pharisee reacted badly to Jesus.
We are not told anything about the Pharisee's response.
The Pharisee could be just one of the many good religious people in the world,
and down through history and in the present day,
for whom the words of Jesus are just a bit daunting.
I have to admit that I am intimidated by this call to kingdom living,
that is, once I stop romanticizing this picture of the banquet table.
This table would be an uncomfortable place for most of us,
where, today, we would sit together with
drug addicts and drunks,

homeless men and women,
 who look and smell as if they haven't bathed in a week
 because they haven't,
people who've grown accustomed to living in slum conditions,
men and women who've been in prison,
and people with AIDS,
the mentally ill,
 to name a few.

People whose stories would probably make us lose our appetite.
If this picture Jesus paints doesn't make us uncomfortable,
 we probably haven't really seen it.

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The other day just before staff meeting, I was drinking a cup of coffee.
I was drinking out of a mug from the 1997 General Assembly
 where the theme was "The Great Ends of the Church"
On the side of this coffee mug it says,
 "The Great Ends of the Church: What Unites Presbyterians".
Someone joked they know what really unites Presbyterians:
 it's that we like to eat!
 Any excuse to get together and eat – we Presbyterians are there!
In fact, nothing could be more true, or – you'll be happy to hear –
 more biblical:
 it is the table of our Lord that stands at the center of our worship
 and our life together.
There is no act more central
 than the sharing of the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
 the body and blood of our Lord.
 It is this act of eating together that binds us together
 in the Spirit of the Living God.

I have spoken in another sermon about
 the Open Door Community in Atlanta,
 a ministry to the homeless which operates out of an old house
 in the city.

The members of the Open Door Community
 serve meals to the homeless throughout the week.
And several times a week, after serving the meal in the dining room,
 the dishes are put away, the tables moved to the side, chairs rearranged,
 and the dining room is transformed in to a place of worship,
 where the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached,
 and the workers and the homeless lift songs and prayer to God.
In fact, this scene is very much like the church of the first century.
When the early church first began to meet,
 it was not in ornate sanctuaries,
 with pews all in a row facing the front.
The first churches met in people's houses,

and usually around their tables,
gathered around a meal.
Table fellowship
has always been a central, defining characteristic of the church.

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So if Jesus were sitting at our church's table, what would he notice?
If Jesus, the sociologist, looked at the customs of our eating together,
as a congregation,
what would he see?
Do we eat with the poor? The invite the outcast of our society?
People would could not repay our generosity in any way?
Even more, if we at Glenshaw Presbyterian Church,
the church for the community,
are called to exhibit the kingdom of God to our community,
what sort of kingdom do we exhibit?
Who do we invite to our table?
Would the poor and outcast of our society consider our table
a place where they are welcome?

I met a colleague this week, the Rev. Cynthia Jackson,
who serves as pastor of the Calvert Memorial Presbyterian Church
in Etna.

While showing me around the church,
she pointed to a piece of white poster board
with pictures of the church members taped on it.
Then she showed me another poster board with pictures of
10 to 15 people from to communities of Etna and Sharpsburg
who come and receive from the church's food pantry,
several times a month.

The people in these pictures are now attending worship at Calvert Memorial
on Sunday mornings.

Obviously, they cannot repay the church for the food they have received.
Their attendance at Sunday worship will not be likely to help
the church budget.

But they have been welcomed at the table of the Lord,
and (if the word of the Lord can be trusted),
then those who welcome them at Calvert Memorial
will be blessed.

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This morning, during the announcements,
I mentioned the need in our congregation
for a team of people to work with the Lazarus Fund,
Pittsburgh Presbytery's fund for emergency assistance
to the poor.

The idea behind having a Lazarus Fund Team,

is that the congregation would begin to form relationships
with poor people and poor families in the community
so as not to offer just a Band-Aid solution to their symptoms
but to care for them in a more sustained way
and help them address the root causes of their poverty.

Well, ever since I arrived in June,
we've been receiving calls from people in the community
who are applying for assistance from the Lazarus Fund.
And this past week –
it's as if the word somehow got out on the street
that lectionary text from Luke contains the words
“invite the poor” –
we've been receiving a sudden flood of these calls.
We've set up appointments for some
(and we've told others they have to wait).
All the while I've also been living with these words of Jesus.
I keep hearing,
“When you give a banquet, invite the poor...you will be blessed.”

And I wonder what would happen if once a month
we were to invite these people to dinner, serve them a meal,
sit down at the table with them, get to know them,
treat them like human beings ought to be treated,
and then take their application for assistance.
Would we get a glimpse of the kingdom of God?
Would we grow as a community that more clearly reflects the image of Christ?
Would we be disciples who have taken up our Masters ministry
to a hurting world?

If you think so, and would like to share in this kind of ministry,
put your name on the list out there in the narthex today.

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We are never told how this Pharisee responds to Jesus.
The story is left with an open ending.
I think Luke knew what he was doing there,
because if this story is to have any kind of meaningful ending,
if the kingdom of God is to appear in our midst,
it will not be on the printed page,
but, rather,
right here, and out there,
in the life – and table fellowship – of the church
of Jesus Christ.