

Sermon: Pentecost 15

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Year C
Sirach 10:12-18
Psalm 112
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

One of my clergy colleagues... just told me a story about how she recently went to Meijer Gardens to see a concert... and if you know how that terraced space is set up... at each step... there's a shallow concrete retaining wall... and she and her friends had their chairs right up to the very edge of that step... with no room in front of them for their cooler... but some people just in front of the wall... left a few feet of unused space between the wall and the backs of their chairs... and so this woman put their cooler down below the wall and behind these chairs... thinking it was a good solution... and one of the people in the chairs... the husband... even though this cooler wasn't impinging on them at all... turned around and asked them to move the cooler because "maybe... his wife would want to move her chair back some..."

The cooler wasn't in anyone's way... but he had planted his flag... he had staked out their space... as though they owned it... and maybe his wife *would* want to move her chair back some... later... and if so... couldn't they ask for the cooler to be moved then [?]... but maybe this pre-emptive request was nothing more than a ploy to take possession of a small area of turf and claim ownership of something that wasn't theirs... a way of taking something perceived to be valuable... and not wanting to share it... even though there was a need... even though his wife *might only want to*... because there can be some pride... in sitting in better territory...

Sirach cautions us against pride... says that pride separates our hearts from our Maker... and that when we cling to sin... we pour out abominations... this is strong language... but it reminded me of what Mark 3:28 says... I've thought about this passage many times... it says: *Truly I tell you... people will be forgiven for their sins and*

whatever blasphemies they utter... but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness... but is guilty of an eternal sin...

Can never have forgiveness... never again [?]. . . that's a pretty iron-clad... paint-yourself-into-a-corner kind of judgment... but as I thought about it... it struck me that it's true... because blaspheming the Holy Spirit rejects that which connects us and makes us One... rejects that we are all part of the body of Christ... it rejects that what we do and say affects each other... and empowers me to say: *I have no need of you...* and worse yet I think... is that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is a form of self-idolatry which says: *I am whole and complete in myself... and I got there all by myself...*

And there can be no forgiving this isolationist blasphemy... because forgiveness is a function of relationship... and without relationship... there is no one to ask for forgiveness... and no one to accept it...

And offering forgiveness... and accepting it... is an expression of humility... of knowing who we are and who we're not... Philippians 2:3 says: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit... but in humility regard others as better than yourselves...* not worse... but better... and in vv. 5-6: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who did not regard equality with God... as something to be exploited...* and so when we don't puff ourselves up... convince ourselves that we're better than anyone else... we can more easily level the playing field...

When Jesus noticed how the guests at this Sabbath meal chose the places of honor... he told them a parable about a wedding banquet... they didn't have white linen tablecloths then... with embossed place cards on each dinner plate... seating was probably more like what's on Southwest Airlines... or like the amphitheater at Meijer Gardens... and people either got in a queue... or maybe scrambled to be as close to the head table... or the front of the plane... or as close to the stage as they could be... and all you have to do is drive on M-6 for a few miles to see how people scramble to get

ahead of you... but Jesus said... choose low... not because you don't matter... but so you might be raised up... it's better than playing by society's rules by which you might be brought low... and be disgraced...

But we like those places of honor... don't we [?]. ... maybe it helps us overcome the many ways in which culture really does try to diminish us... tell us how unworthy we are... but too often... too many seek the power that comes from those places... so they can lord it over others... but in his book Mere Christianity... C.S. Lewis wrote: *True humility is not thinking less of yourself... it is thinking of yourself less...* and I think he means less often...

On August 15... just a couple weeks ago... in a restaurant in Harrisonburg, VA... customers who received their take-out meal from waitress Sadie Elledge thought more of themselves... they tried to disgrace her... by not leaving a tip...

Although Sadie was born in the US... is an American citizen... she is of Honduran and Mexican descent... she looks like a *Latina*... and on the credit card slip... the woman who paid the bill wrote: *We only tip citizens*... this couple came to be served... but in some twisted way... they thought they could hurl insults from their mental seats of prideful honor... but by asserting themselves in this way... they unknowingly took lower seats...

A seat of honor can look nothing like a chair... it can take many forms... it can feed our pride and serve as a distraction from our brokenness... as we try to reject our humanity and ward off the humiliation... not that God inflicts on us... but that we inflict on each other... like the humiliating death the Romans inflicted on Jesus... but even in his nakedness and bleeding... even on the cross... he refused to be / could not be humiliated... and said to the humble thief next to him... who did not deserve it... *today you will be with me in paradise*...

In today's Gospel... Jesus also exhorts his host: when you give a luncheon or dinner... don't invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbors... but invite the poor... the crippled... the lame... and the blind... because when you invite those who can reciprocate... and they do... your gift becomes a contract... and you have received your reward...

The same kind of sentiment is echoed in Matthew 6: When you give alms... and a trumpet is sounded before you so that you can be praised by others... you have received your reward... when you pray and stand on the street corners so others can see you... you have received your reward... but when you invite people like Sadie Elledge to your Babette's Feast... when you invite the poor... the crippled... the lame... and the blind... you will be blessed... because they cannot repay you for your hospitality... it will be gift... and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous...

Now James 2:14 asks: *What good is it... if you say you have faith... but do not have works...* and it is good to do good works... when we open our gardens to Bhutanese and other refugees and provide them a space to grow food... when we open our doors and teach them English and help them become citizens... we are showing this kind of hospitality... when we open our doors and welcome those who need help caring for their children through Diaper Depot... we are showing this kind of hospitality... when we collect food and other items for those who for whatever reason have a hard time providing for themselves... we are showing this kind of hospitality... because we are not asking them to... and they cannot pay us back...

But we must remain mindful of... and guard against the pride about which Sirach warns us... in thinking that the good that comes... comes from only us... because... I have to tell you... when we move in that direction... we move towards embracing that self-idolatry... and towards rejecting that which connects us to each other and to all of creation...

And when we are fed at this Table... to help us do that work... Jesus is our host...
Jesus invites us... and our veils are lifted and we see that we have become the poor...
the crippled... the lame... and the blind... we are not invited because Jesus expects
reciprocity... what we eat and drink here at this Table is undeserved new life... and
gift... and there is nothing we could ever do either... to repay Jesus for the feast we
receive... And for this we say: Thanks be to God...

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