

Sermon: Pentecost 12

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 1, 2019

Year C

Sirach 10:12-18

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Have you ever been to the Meyer May House... here in Grand Rapids... [it's on Madison Ave. SE]... not everyone knows about it... it was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright... and has been immaculately restored with funds from Steelcase's deep pockets... and it really is... a jewel of a home... I've been through it twice... it's easier to imagine living there... than in some other Wright homes I've visited... I mean Fallingwater is far more iconic... but in some ways is less livable... but the May home invites... and it's easy to imagine the views outside the windows being my views... easy to imagine mapping out the floor plan in my head so that I could navigate it with eyes closed... easy to imagine entertaining there... though... for me... not easy to imagine sharing it with staff...

Have you ever been to the Biltmore Estate... on the outskirts of Asheville, NC... George Vanderbilt spared no expense when he opened his new home on Christmas Eve 1895... to family and friends... The Asheville Citizen Times reported that... *Mr. Vanderbilt is to entertain... in his chateau... 300 guests from New York... who will arrive by private train... and they will enjoy the mirth and happiness of this yule-tide season... in his modern Aladdin's palace...*

Biltmore's 250 rooms include 35 bedrooms... 43 bathrooms... 65 fireplaces... and central heat... an elevator... a swimming pool... gymnasium... bowling alley... horse stables... and a conservatory... and many of those rooms are filled to overflowing with priceless works of art... sculpture... and ceramics... I wouldn't begrudge Mr. Vanderbilt his appreciation of fine things... and his purchase of them... but to appreciate the scope

of what he did... just imagine turning the Metropolitan Museum of Art... with its vast collection... into a private home...

The photograph on our bulletin cover... is of Biltmore's Banquet Hall... with its massive triple fireplace... and 1916 Skinner pipe organ... its seventy foot-ceiling... and sixteenth-century Flemish tapestries... and how large was Vanderbilt's family... how many people needed to spread out over its four acres of floor space... just his wife... daughter... and himself... and the staff... "in service" to the family and estate...

George Vanderbilt mingled with the social elite of his time... and we might imagine who he invited into his home... who might have sat in one of the thirty-eight banquet chairs the table could accommodate... and just where the seat of honor might be... and who might have vied for it...

I know someone... I won't say who... it's too awkward... but I know someone... a friend or a relative who does not reside in Michigan... and this person is in the investment field... in a large city... somewhat well-connected you might say... and I heard them brag once... about a woman they knew... who was pregnant... and was going to need a c-section... and she wanted to schedule the procedure in advance of a pleasure trip she and her family were planning to take... but her doctor had no openings... so this person I know... who had her obstetrician as one of their clients... pulled some strings... and got the surgeon to bump another woman who had already been scheduled at that time... so this first woman could be accommodated... leveraging contacts and favors... and jockeying for position...

In the Netflix series Outlander... there's a scene at a WWII train station... in which Claire is going off to her assignment as an army nurse... and is saying goodbye to her husband Frank... and he tells her that he's trying to get her orders changed... so she's... I guess... farther away from the front lines... and she says... *Frank... I don't feel it's right to use your connections... what about these other men... they've no one to*

change their orders... if people use the system to their own benefit... then we might as well just give up the ship and start speaking German... of course... she's not denigrating German itself... but the behaviors of some of those who spoke it...

We know that seating charts at Biltmore were determined well in advance... there are photographs of some of them on the estate's website... there would be none at our Gospel's Sabbath meal... but Jesus noticed how guests chose the places of honor on their own... and he cautioned them against doing so... and Jesus' words were true on two levels...

In the honor / shame backdrop of his time... Jesus knew that it would be far more humiliating to presume a place of honor... and then be asked to vacate it for someone else... than to take the lowest seat... the seat that's farthest from the host... and then... possibly be asked to be seated next to him... in a more conspicuous place... and secondly... he knew that when our thoughts and actions are determined by... and limited by the small self... it's much more difficult to give up the world's places and measures of honor... and take the less desirable ones... but when we are grounded in our True Self... when we are established in the Ground of Being... when we are one as Jesus and God are One and we own that... then what we own is all that matters... and it cannot be taken away from us... last week's Epistle from Hebrews alluded to this... when it said that... *what cannot be shaken will remain... that we will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken...*

There was a news report we heard Tuesday night... about how the current administration is ending a medical relief policy that allowed some undocumented families... particularly children... to remain in the United States... in order to continue receiving life-saving treatment... for their life-ending diseases... some of the children are U.S. citizens... but the parents are not... and they have begun receiving letters which not only told them that the program is ending... but they are being given only 33 days to leave the country... or they will be deported... a death sentence for some of

these children... because in some countries... the medical community does not even know about their diseases... and in others... they simply don't have the medical resources to treat them...

This... in my estimation... is proof that there is evil in the world... whether it comes to pass... or whether it is being peddled as nothing more than a distraction... it is somehow putting places of honor... ahead of our True Selves... it speaks of a disregard for God's Word and God's Way... an unwillingness to care for the neighbor... and we see embodied in these efforts... the belief that these are not our problems... that these are not the values for which we stand...

When I think what would be more just... what would reflect God's justice and the Gospel far more closely... would be for the chorus of our elected officials' voices... to acknowledge... that the problems we face may not be fully resolved even in our lifetimes... but they are our problems... and that this is the work we are called to do... and that we set our collective shoulders to the wheel to do it...

In Philippians 2:5-11... we are exhorted to... *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...*

Bp. Satterlee reminds us... that Jesus is not... as some Pharisees have accused him... a glutton... he is more about receiving guests... he is at Table to teach... to reprove some people... and to encourage those at the margins... and when we sit at the lowest place... because we feel marginalized or invisible... Jesus comes and sits with us... so we can sit with others... and when God says to Jesus... go up higher... he goes up

from the grave... from death... and is raised to new life... and he brings us with him...
this is the promise of baptism...

In the mean time... he brings us to this Table... where we feast... and we become the
broken ones the Gospel mentions... who can never repay our host... and in that
experience... we become able to host those who can never repay us...

You know... in early centuries... the church did not reach out to young families... but to
the outcast... the marginalized... and those who were invisible... and in his advice
about feasting... Jesus doesn't just tell us... he shows us who he is... and invites us to
share in his life... by being like him...

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