



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 12 Proper 17 (C)**

#### **Watching**

**[RCL] Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14**

There is watching going on in the gospel lesson today. Jesus was invited to eat at the house of the leader of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees were watching him. Jesus was watching them back and noticed that the guests were scrambling to occupy the premium seats. Based on his comment to his host, Jesus also observed that his host has invited the *who's who* in that community. Jesus, knowing that the seats people choose and the guests they keep reveal not just their social and economic standing but more importantly their inner selves, took the opportunity to teach the guests and the host about humility and hospitality.

To the guests, Jesus tells a parable of a wedding banquet that seems to describe exactly what was going on in front of him. He tells them that it is wiser to sit in the lowest place and wait for the host's invitation to "move up higher." He goes on to say, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The parable echoes the first reading from Proverbs (25:6-7), which says, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."

Jesus is not just teaching about table manners and practical advice to avoid embarrassment here. He is also not saying that we should *not* sit in premium seats. He is teaching humility. Apparently, one way to prop one's social standing at that time was to be invited to parties of influential and affluent people such as the head Pharisee and to sit as close as possible to the host.

While self-promotion is the accepted way to get ahead in the world, humility is the way to please God. Those who exalt themselves tend to think they are better or more important than others. The humble think less of themselves and make room for others.

Jesus then tells his host that when he throws a dinner party, he should not invite those who can invite him back: his friends, families, and affluent neighbors. Instead, he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind who could not invite him back so that he will be repaid at the resurrection.

Luke does not mention how the guests and host reacted to Jesus' politically incorrect comments; it is not hard to imagine that they were shocked!

It can be easy for us to judge the guests at the Pharisees' dinner who are scrambling for the best seats as arrogant and pathetic social climbers. But the truth is, we are so much like the guests and the host. Pride and the desire to exalt oneself are part of fallen humanity. We all have this desire to be better, to achieve, to be on top, to be number one, and to be admired. We see this in the Garden when Adam and Eve gave in to the temptation to be like God. The story of the Tower of Babel where people wanted to build a tower to reach heaven to make a name for themselves is another example of human desire for attention. The people of Israel took pride and privilege of their "Chosenness" as People of God and Jesus' disciples often quarreled as to who among them was the greatest. We see this in the divisions in the church. We see it in our own churches. People may volunteer to sit in vestries and committees, be acolytes, read lessons, and do other more "glamorous" ministries but few volunteer to stay behind and wash the dishes, collect the used bulletins after service, cut the grass, or other behind-the-scenes ministries.

Indeed, many of us prefer to sit in premium seats and share the same guest list as the host of Jesus. We like to brush shoulders with famous people hoping that their importance will rub off on us. And just like in the time of Jesus, we do what is easy and automatically invite families, friends, and respectable members of the community to our dinner parties. In church functions and gatherings, people normally take selfies with the visiting bishop or famous guest of honor and post them on their social media. Nothing wrong with this - but people do not normally take selfies with those laboring behind the scenes. If they do, the photos are not usually posted on Facebook or Instagram.

This desire to exalt oneself is connected to our need for love, admiration, and attention. There is nothing wrong with wanting to excel and achieve and be loved or admired. But this can be destructive and self-defeating when, in our desire to impress people and get their attention, we think less of them. The gospel challenges us to "fix" this need to exalt ourselves for the sake of being loved by being humble. This is like one of those paradoxical teachings of Jesus, like "Those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." In other words, Jesus is saying in the gospel that the way *up* is *down*.

Jesus invites us to review our guest list, especially those we do not welcome. Who is the equivalent of the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind who are not usually invited to our parties? Check your list if it includes the following:

- Drug addicts
- Immigrants, strangers, and people who do not speak and look like you
- Homeless people
- Members of the LGBTQ community
- People who disagree with you politically and religiously
- People who have hurt you in the past

Consider this as you ponder your list: if you do not invite these people, might you be saying that Jesus is not welcomed at your table?

Then look around your church and communion table. Who is present and who is not? Is there diversity? Do the people there look mostly like you and speak the same language as you? We need to expand our circle and redefine family and friends and not just stick to what is easy and familiar. Family is not an exclusive or private group based on bloodline or race; as Jesus said in Luke 8:21, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

Finally, have you ever thought that we might be the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? And still, Jesus freely extends his invitation and welcomes us to his table. We are sinners, and yet, by God’s grace, we have seats of honor at God’s table. It is a wonder that we get welcomed, though we cannot reciprocate God’s hospitality. How are we to respond to the gracious generosity of God? We reciprocate by opening our lives to those who are different from us and those with whom we would not normally associate. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us in our second lesson, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman**, of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Divine in Tamuning, Guam.*