



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE TWELFTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

AUGUST 28, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Today's reading from the Gospel according to Luke appears to be about food – a wedding banquet, a luncheon or a dinner – and about the social graces that accompany such occasions. None of this should be surprising. Jesus was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton, and often was seen as dining with the wrong crowd, though not in this story. Today we hear about his dining, actually eating the Sabbath meal, with a leader of the Pharisees.

But we all know that the focus of Jesus' teaching and preaching was neither fine dining nor etiquette. We might suspect that something much more important was going on here. And if we are slow to pick up on that, Luke tells us this story of how to behave at the wedding banquet is not about proper behavior at wedding banquets or dinner parties, but is a parable – a simple, straightforward story that has a lot more to teach us than meets the eye on the surface. And in the case of Scripture, typically requires context to plumb its unseen depths.

Today's parable is no exception. In the culture of the first century, honor and shame were defining of a person's position and worth. Had Jesus had the misfortune of travelling by air, whether he sat in First Class would have been a big deal. It would have meant much more than a wider seat, more legroom, free drinks, and early boarding.

Sitting up front showed you were part of the honored of society, the elite, the rich, and the powerful. Sitting in the back you were just one of them. If you were at the head table at the banquet, preening in the dress circle at the amphitheater, or noshing in the owner's box at the coliseum, you were among the favored few. And more importantly, everybody knew it! And maybe most importantly...you did, too.

Now another layer of context is in order if we are to understand what Jesus was getting at. And then another. First, let's remember that Jesus was dining with a Pharisee. And what were the Pharisees at their worst notorious for? They built a vast superstructure of detailed, demanding rules on top of the Torah, the Law, and thought themselves better than everyone else because they not only promulgated these ever righteous rules, but also touted their supposed compliance with them. Moreover, they were sure that God loved them more than any other party or tribe or people. So they were certain that on the day of judgment, when the gates of heaven opened wide, they would be the first ones through. Because God always liked them best. And what is Jesus telling them? Don't go jumping to the front of the line. Don't assume the place of honor. Because God loves everyone and none more than another.

We might note also that when the Gospel according to Luke was being written, the Jewish people were dividing between those who chose to follow Jesus and those who remained in the synagogue and held their traditions in an unrelenting grasp. And so who had no doubt that God had to love them more for their faithfulness and adherence to their version of God's commands.

Luke had to see that this parable of the seating at the banquet also would send a message to those Jews who felt superior for snubbing the growing ranks of early Christians.

So, yes, we have a story that reminds us to be humble and compassionate and to be graceful dinner guests and generous hosts. But mainly we have a parable that reminds us that our religious beliefs and observances do not grant us superior standing in the eyes of God. God created each and every one of us. God loves each and everyone of us as the subjects of God's creation and the objects of God's unconditional, everlasting love.

And the tragedy is, as Jesus was showing us in the parable, that it so often is religion that obscures and divides us. It is religion that makes capricious, but convenient distinctions that beckon us to discriminate, diminish, and demonize. And when we demonize the other, when we reduce them to a status less favored by God than we think we are, we may treat them as less worthy and ultimately less human. And when that happens, we find no more limits on the cruelty we can visit on our fellow humans.

No religion is immune. Every religion has its lunatic fringe, those who embrace violence to force their beliefs on others. Witness the Inquisition, the Holocaust, 9/11, and the residential schools in Canada. Violence is so easy to defend when we just know God is on our side. But, of course, that asks the wrong question. What we should ask is whether we are on God's side.

Nearly every religious faith, mystical metaphysics, or humanist ethical system including the three Abrahamic faiths, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, base their ethical codes on similar notions of loving God and loving neighbor, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Which leads us to the last lesson from today's Gospel reading. If we all are in so much agreement about how to live our lives, why are we so often at each other's throats? There are some obvious answers, of course: greed, fear, the lust for power, wealth, and prestige, all those human foibles that set our better angels aside from time to time.

But there is another more nuanced answer: We can so easily at times lose our sense of proportion. The Pharisees placed so much store in very detailed rules and interpretations that they lost sight of the basic command to love. And in the process accorded comparable weight to their particular interpretations of the Law, which then became a basis for division in their Jewish community and hostility to the Gentiles.

Does this sound familiar? Do we tend to emphasize the differences which divide us and neglect the things that we agree on? Even within Christianity, we have hundreds if not thousands of denominations that exist largely just because we focus on the non-essentials that divide rather than the essentials that unite.

This summer all the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered in England, as they do every ten years. The differences in cultures across the globe were evident. And those differences on matters such as human sexuality might have divided the Anglican Communion.

But they did not. Differences were acknowledged, but they were kept in perspective. They were not given disproportionate importance.

And this seems to be a challenge today across so many elements of society. Certainly, it persists in religion. It has become painfully obvious in politics. Even basic family relationships can fall prey to it and often do. And the consequences can be quite severe – and usually quite unnecessary.

Jesus said there were many rooms in heaven. But he never said there was an owner's box. Jesus often uses a banquet to describe heaven, but he never mentions a high table. In heaven we never will have occasion to complain, "Jesus always liked you best." So let's just get over who God likes best. Because God loves us all best. And that is as true for the least of us as it is for those who somehow think that God loves them more.