

God's Upside-Down Reign

“When you are invited ... to a ... banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor.”

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We've had a rough go of it in Luke the past few weeks, haven't we? Two weeks ago, Jesus asked: “Do you think I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Last week, Jesus dressed down the Pharisees who were – admittedly – overzealous about the sabbath. “You hypocrites!”

At first blush, it seems we catch a break this week. Jesus, observing guests jockeying for the best seats at a party, tells a parable. Luke *calls it* a parable, but seems to operate more like a Proverb.¹ Rather than leading his listeners to locate themselves within a story, Jesus addresses them directly.

¹ In fact, Jesus' teaching echoes various verses from the Book of Proverbs, most especially Proverbs 25:6-7.

When you're invited to a banquet, don't sit at the place of honor, because the host may ask you to give up your place to a more distinguished guest. Sit at the lowest place and maybe you'll be invited to move up.

It's good advice, succinctly stated – the sort of thing we know is true when we hear it, but might not have articulated so clearly. Reading along in Luke, I find myself nodding in assent. “Thank you, Jesus. Helpful advice.”

Then comes verse 11, and the temptation to hear Jesus as the Emily Post of antiquity instructing us in dinner party etiquette evaporates. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Next Jesus addresses the host directly: “Don't invite your friends to your parties or those who might reciprocate; invite those who can't repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Ouch. Perhaps it's a parable after all – a narrative in which I'm meant to find myself. It's painfully easy for me. How often have I been guilty of seeking to advance my own status and fortune instead of humbling myself

in the interest of bringing others along? “All who exalt themselves will be humbled.” How often have I, as host, invited only friends, most of whom are fully able to reciprocate? “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Today, we come face to face with a core principle of Jesus’ life and teaching: the ways of this world are turned upside down in God’s reign. Because of this, there are two messages to parse out in Luke’s text.

To those here today who struggle to make ends meet – who would, if invited to a dinner party, struggle to return the kindness – to those without access to affordable health insurance who must choose between needed care and paying rent, Jesus brings good news. God sees you. God values you. You may be among the humble now, but you are the “very fabric of

God's realm."² Trust and hope in Jesus' promise that the reign of God has come near. The humble will be exalted.

Now I'll be honest – that message is not *for me* today. When Jesus speaks of God turning the world upside down, I am meant to hear the other side of this message: the exalted will be humbled. I suspect many of us are called to hear this message. According to the 2018 Global Wealth Report from Credit Suisse, those with a net worth of \$93,170 are wealthier than 90 percent of the world's population.³ This means that if the value of your home, financial accounts, vehicles, and other possessions – after subtracting your debt – is greater than \$93,000, you are among the wealthiest 10 percent of people in the world.

\$93,000. That's shockingly low.

² Emilie M. Townes, "Theological Perspective" from *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2* (Proper 17).

³ Kathleen Elkins, "How much money you need to be among the richest 10 percent of people worldwide", published November 7, 2018 and accessed online at <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/11/07/how-much-money-you-need-to-be-in-the-richest-10-percent-worldwide.html> on August 30, 2019.

Friends, though some here today fall below this level, most of us exceed it. And, if we're honest, many of us are still jockeying for more. The irony is we're simultaneously socking away as much as we can and spending money on things we don't need. Do you know that self-storage warehousing is a \$38 *billion* industry?⁴

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Margot Starbuck, a minister in the PCUSA, says it's no wonder we exalted ones, we top-10%'ers, engage in this unending cycle. We're so “bombarded by advertisements insisting we deserve more” that we've become unable to recognize when we have “enough.”⁵ To those of us who

⁴ Patrick Sisson, “Self-storage: How warehouses for personal junk became a \$38 billion industry”, March 27, 2018, accessed online at <https://www.curbed.com/2018/3/27/17168088/cheap-storage-warehouse-self-storage-real-estate> on August 29, 2019.

⁵ Margot Starbuck, “Why the Gospel That's Good News for the Poor is now Good News for the Rich (and by "rich", I mean me)”, December 30, 2010, accessed online at <https://www.redletterchristians.org/why-the-gospel-thats-good-news-for-the-poor-is-now-good-news-for-the-rich-and-by-rich-i-mean-me/> on August 29, 2019.

are not among the humble, struggling poor, Jesus says “stop it.” As the author of Hebrews puts it: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.” Friends, we must learn to recognize and accept enough.”

We pray for this regularly when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. In Luke’s version, Jesus teaches us to pray: “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread” (11:2-3). Your kingdom – the one in which the values of the world are turned upside down – your kingdom come. Give us enough.

Revealing God’s upside-down kingdom is one of Luke’s primary theological objectives. Only Luke includes Mary’s Magnificat in his Gospel.

“God ... has **brought down** the powerful from their thrones, and **lifted up** the lowly; God has filled the **hungry** with good things, and sent the **rich** empty away.”

In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6 (a counterpart to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount), Jesus speaks not only of beatitudes (or blessings):

Blessed are you who are poor,
yours is the kingdom of God.
'Blessed are you who are hungry,
you will be filled.

but also of curses:

woe to you who are rich,
you have received your consolation.
'Woe to you who are full,
you will be hungry.

The kingdom of God brings *radical* change – it turns the world upside down. And for those who are exalted now, those of us in the top 10% worldwide, this truth is terrifying, because we who are exalted stand to lose everything to those who not. It's hard to read this text and others like it without wondering if God plans for me to spend the second half of my

life living on the street while several homeless folks live in my house for a change.

Yet, as Pastor Starbuck observes:

If the dramatic reversal of fortune only means that a different subset of people will be paying too much money to store ... their stuff in ... rented storage units, there's really no point.⁶

That can't be what Jesus is about.

This is where contentment comes into play. To join together as a community of rich and poor, humble and exalted, and to pray collectively “give **us** each day our daily bread” is to pray for **everyone** to have enough. Praying for daily bread, ask pray that those who are poor will finally “breathe a ... sigh of relief that they no longer have to scramble after thin garbage scraps to feed their children because, at last, there is enough.”⁷ As

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

we pray for daily bread, we pray that those in the top 10% “will finally breathe a ... sigh of relief that we no longer have to carry around the crushing weight of all the stuff that was supposed to make us ... happy, because we have enough.”⁸

Both prayers are answered in the reign of God. As we with more than enough heed the call to keep our lives free from the love of money and find contentment with enough; as we follow Christ into self-giving, sacrificial love for all, we cooperate with him in bringing the reign of God. Whether we are humble or exalted now, there is good news for all of us in Jesus’ words: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

And all God’s people said ...

⁸ Ibid.