

A Sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14
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Plymouth UCC
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It's Labor Day weekend. Summer is officially over. Oh, I know—the calendar says we still have three weeks left of the season, but for all real purposes, it's over. School has started. So has football season. And next week we'll officially kick off our program year at Plymouth with a Service of Christian Nurture. Sunday School starts next week. Kids' choirs, too. Classes, events and Bible study—just take a look at this week's announcement sheet and you can see that we are ramping up for a year full of ways to love and serve God.

With that in mind, this is a “welcome back” sermon to all of you who may have taken a little time off this summer. To get started, we'll begin with an assignment: think about where you saw God this summer. Go ahead—I'll give you 30 seconds to think of something. (wait 30 seconds). Now, turn to 2, 3 or 4 of your neighbors and share your thoughts. You have 2 minutes. Start talking.

Did you see God? Unusual stories? Fun stories? Interesting stories? I'll bet there are. We all see God in different ways, at different times. I'll tell you my story now—I'd like for you to tell me your stories later.

I saw God this summer at the Indianapolis Convention Center. Sharon Parker-Lenihan and I were there with a few thousand other pastors and musicians for the National Pastoral Musician's convention: a week full of worship, workshops, keynote speakers, concerts, and prayer. I probably shouldn't have been surprised to find God in the middle of a church convention, but I was. I was there for business, after all. Church business. Official business. Some practical ideas for worship and music at Plymouth. Imagine my surprise when, in the middle of it all, God smacks me upside the head to remind me that there is no separation between work and worship. Every moment of every day is a holy event. I had forgotten...again. The reminder was painful. And wonderful.

It happened at a concert one evening. The St. Louis Jesuits—those Catholic all-stars who have given us great worship hits like “Here I Am, Lord” and “Be Not Afraid”—were celebrating 30 years of writing and performing music together. There were at least 5,000 people in the audience, screaming, standing, clapping, cheering, and singing along with one song after another. You would have thought that the Beatles were on

stage. The guys were obviously having a good time, too—they were laughing, singing, telling stories, and reveling in the moment. The more they sang and shared, the louder the audience got. It was one huge love fest—us and them—until one of the guys stepped to the microphone, thanked the audience for the overwhelming response to their music over the years, and then said (almost as if he were talking to himself), “All I do, all I have ever done, is to further the work and the word of Jesus Christ.”

There was an instant silence in the room. There was an instant stillness in my soul. Those words, that moment, it was one of the most genuine, holy things I have ever witnessed. Of course, I had heard these words (or something like them) before. It seems like almost every actor, musician or athlete utters some kind of praise to Jesus every time they receive an award or score one for the team. The difference is, though, that those moments of praise and thanksgiving usually feel insincere and shallow. This was not insincere or shallow. It was real. It wasn't about getting money or attention or public accolade. It was a God-thing that brought tears to my eyes and nearly brought me to my knees. True humility. That's what it was. True holiness.

The concert went on and people continued to sing, cheer, clap, and dance. But there was no mistaking the fact that we were no longer here just to sing the old favorites and celebrate the gifts of the wonderful men who started writing music 30 years earlier. We were here to sing and celebrate and give thanks to God for the gifts of these wonderful men who started writing music 30 years earlier. There is a difference. A huge difference.

In today's story, Jesus is eating a meal in the home of a Pharisee when he says, “Hey guys. Let me tell you a little story.” Note: when Jesus talks to the Pharisees and says something like “let me tell you a little story” something is about to happen as it is never just “a little story” and people are probably going to be upset because he is going to call into question something that they hold near and dear. See what happens when he's done with this one. “When you go to a banquet don't sit down at the place of honor. Some one more important than you might come along and the host will have to move you—that would be embarrassing. Instead, sit yourself down at the lowest place so that your host can move you up—wouldn't that be cool? Remember: all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Did you hear that? There is was. Jesus just dissed pretty much everybody in the room. All of those people who had been jockeying for position to sit near the host and be somebody? Jesus slammed them with a painful reminder that the world doesn't revolve around them. Oh, yes. That hurt.

I should know. I am reading this text and giving this sermon just two short days after my birthday—a day that most people believe is all about them. Not me. I don't celebrate a birth day. I celebrate a birth week—a whole week filled with celebrations that are, indeed, all about me. This year, in fact, my birth week festivities been extended because of the holiday weekend—I'm celebrating a birthday week and a half. So yes, it seems a little ironic that this text should fall to me to preach. God does have a sense of humor. A sarcastic sense of humor, I think, but a sense of humor none-the-less.

So why did this little story of Jesus' upset people so much? Why does it still irritate and inflame those who hear it today? Probably because if you take these words seriously, you understand that Jesus is talking about radical transformation, going against the culture, taking a stand against the way the world works. Moving to a lower position in the room isn't a quick and simple solution to getting ahead in life. It is a way of life. If you make a big deal of how humble you are ("Oh, never mind me—I'll move to the bottom so you can have a better seat. I don't mind!"), it won't work. And it won't work if you take a lower seat just because you're afraid of being embarrassed by being bumped from a higher seat. Pretending to be humble just isn't the same as being humble. It's not holy. It's not real. It doesn't work.

So how do you do it? How does one go about being humble in a world that encourages us to live life just for us—a world that says it really is all about me? Hmm. Hold that thought. Let's go back to the dinner party for a minute.

You'll notice that there was some text cut out of today's reading. The lectionary doesn't include verses 2-6—a part of the story that has Jesus healing a man who wanders into the dinner party. The guy has dropsy, a disease that isn't life-threatening but would have contaminated the eating area (according to Jewish law). I'm not sure why this part of the reading is cut out—maybe it's because last week's reading dealt with Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath and those who were selecting readings for the year didn't want to repeat themes two weeks in a row. In any case, it's important to know that Jesus begins the meal by offending the host and the guests because he doesn't ask anyone's permission to heal the man. He doesn't ask any

questions at all—he doesn't ask whether or not the guy can come back tomorrow or to see if he would step outside and away from everyone else. He just heals him. Right there in front of everyone. To make matters worse, Jesus doesn't apologize for offending people. Instead, he further offends his host and fellow guests by telling his 'little story', which is basically this: "Stop it. Grow up. There are people here who need your help and you are fighting over who gets to sit in what chair? Give me a break..." (this is Angie's Standard Revised Version of the reading).

Here's the deal: when it's all about you, life is draining, tiring, and often lonely. Making sure that you are always on top, always getting the recognition you 'deserve', always accomplishing things on your own, making sure you are shaking the right hands and meeting the right people, spinning stories so you come out looking good, is absolutely exhausting. It is mentally, spiritually, and physically exhausting. It doesn't have to be that way. Actually, it's not supposed to be that way.

If we, as Jesus suggests, walk into situations unconcerned about upholding a certain image, not thinking about "what's in it for me" or caring where we sit or who we sit by; if we approach life aware of other people and of God's presence in our lives, something amazing happens: we shift. We change. We open up. We grow up. We become real. Humble. Our lives become a blessing to us and a blessing for those around us. That's how it's supposed to be.

Today's story is a reminder that the world doesn't revolve around you. Or me. We are given permission to stop playing the game, to take a seat at the table, and find the peace of God in ourselves and in one another. What a gift. What a gift.

All I do, all I have ever done, is to further the work and the word of Jesus Christ.

May it be so, for me and for you. Amen.