

Warning: some may find the Gospel disturbing
[written in oral form]

Luke 14, 1, 7-14
Proper 17 C

August 28, 2022
Gordon Allaby

Most people know their status and the proper protocol.
They did 2,000 years ago, and we do today.

That awareness is even subconscious.
More powerful people will be the last to enter an elevator, and the first to exit.

At a home party, as the evening progresses, the more powerful will gather in and control the kitchen area.
This just happens.

Most of us would not assume or grab a higher place of honour than our position merits. We adhere to established decorum.

~~~~~

The church I was at in Saskatchewan, had three fancy, high back chairs on the stage behind the pulpit.

The centre chair had a higher back than the other two.

It looked like a throne chair.

I was told it is the "Bishop's chair."

Back in the days of bishops, it was reserved for when "he" came to the church.

So, I was not about to sit in that place of honour.

Yet, on my first Sunday, the worship leader whispered in my ear, "The preacher is expected to sit there."

Whoever preaches sits in the Bishop's Chair; that was how they honoured the preaching responsibility.

It was for the sermon, not the person.

The preacher respected that tradition.

~~~~~

Most people know their proper place.

For example, at a wedding banquet, who would claim and take a seat reserved for the newly weds? ??

Most of us abide by our status and position, most but not all.

~~~~~

In 2017, our regional annual gathering was held in Oakville.

The featured speaker/preacher was this bearded, long-haired man dressed in a very casual bohemian style.

He looked really hip/ very cool. He had a cultivated persona.

He was one of the charismatic ministers in the mega-church, called the Meeting House church.

No one else was dressed as he was. So, I think his attire was intended to make a statement.  
He was in costume.  
No big deal, except for drawing attention to himself.

I was more alarmed by his presentation.  
His theology was nothing new, yet his packaging was impressive.  
He was slick at marketing, and **he himself** was part of the product.  
That greatly troubled me.

He was elevating himself.  
You could tell he liked to be admired.  
That adoration gave him power, and he used that power.  
He sexually abused women. This was recently revealed.

Jesus said in verse 9 that self promotion leads to disgrace and shame.

~~~~~

Compare that character to someone like Wendell Berry or Fredrick Buechner.
Both are/were humble. They are respected because they let their message stand on its own.

I said **were**, Buechner died on August 15.

~~~~~

Beware of those who seek admiration.  
And, Please, do not adore any leader or preacher.  
Do not put a minister up on a pedestal.

*Fortunately, that is not a problem in our church. 😊*

~~~~~

Still, we tend to admire those who strive for greatness / who rise to the top.
Be watchful of that pursuit. Be careful.

The fight to excel / to rise higher in the judgment of others is costly, and often destructive.
The pursuit of praise and adoration is dangerous.

~~~~~

About ten years ago, I person I respected said,  
Mediocrity is under appreciated.

I was surprised by his statement, but have grown to see the wisdom in those words.

~~~~~

Nevertheless, nearly all of us are comfortable with our station in life. We follow proper decorum. We follow the rules.

YET, beginning in verse 12 of Luke 14, Jesus said THAT is NOT good enough.

For those of comfort and privilege, most of us, maintaining our position of entitlement is NOT the Gospel way /the way of God.

~~~~~

In our society, the privileged have laws to protect but not bind.  
The law for Outsiders binds but does Not protect.

The legal system/ the laws work for us. They secure the status quo, and we can bypass the exceptions.

~~~~~

Jesus presented a method to change the “system”.
Our system keeps the comfortable “comfortable” at the expense of the less fortunate.

Jesus said do not invite to a party/ into your domain your peers and those of higher status because they will pay you back in kind.

In other words, do Not invest in the system that is keeping you affluent. Do Not reinforce the unjust arrangements.

Reciprocity was and is typical behaviour.
Returning the favour / the generosity maintains or even advances one’s station in life.

~~~~~

Instead, Jesus directed, “Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”  
Host / invite in those on the outside—the marginalized, powerless and the poor.

~~~~~

When I was young, growing up in Toronto, my father would frequently bring someone or family home for supper.
They were strangers, and I could tell they were different from the people we usually associated with.

When I got a little older, I learned they were people who stopped by the church asking for help.
The church would give them assistance, and my father would invite them to our house to connect and have a meal.

I thought about that years later.
I had just finished seminary, and I regularly volunteered in the inner-city homeless shelter.
Others in my church did too.

After our shift, we would all return to our safe, comfortable homes, feeling good about our charity.
I recall thinking about what my father did.

~~~~~

But I was not willing to go that far to invite someone in.  
I doubt others in the church broke the pattern either.

We, the comfortable and secure, donate what we can afford without risking our status and financial security.

However, Jesus presented a very different formula.

It begins with breaking barriers, inviting outsiders “in”.

Hosting is giving / empowering with no payback.

Think about this.

The Outcome is a net loss. You will lose money and influence. If this pattern continues, then there will be equality with those “outsiders.”

Jesus was advocating for financial and social equality.

This Gospel message is very Marxist.

~~~~~

Verse 14 mentions being blessed and the effects for the future.

A blessing usually is what draws us closer to God.

And, keep in mind, that process could be unsettling, at first.

Also, eschatology and social ethics belong together.

Consider Revelation 21:5, “Behold I am making all things new.”

All things new.

Jesus was advocating for a radical restructuring of the social order.

~~~~~

Helmut Gollwitzer, in his book *The Rich Christians and Poor Lazarus*, said, “Traditional Charity is not enough because it does not aim at the causes of distress, but only cures the symptoms.”

He pointed out that the Bible is clear about righteousness and shalom/peace not being limited to individuals.

Repeatedly, the Bible shows that God intended all, including organizations and governments, to do justice and be righteous.

Karl Barth stated, over 80 years ago, that Christian renewal movements focussed on individuals and never wrestled with the paganism of the institution—the system, including Churches.

We accept change in individuals from God’s infusion, but are hesitant to change the system, the church.

Yet, we are confronted with a limitless God who through Jesus directs us to make “all things new” / to erase the barriers / to create equality and social justice.

~~~~~  
The church is struggling. The Christian religion is in peril.
We seem to have acquired a spirit of resignation without hope.

Martin Luther said, "One cannot be a Christian without hope."
~~~~~

Helmut Gollwitzer reflected on the state of the church,  
stating, "Young adults understand [what is going on]."  
He said that young adults disengaging from organized church is NOT apostasy, but rather it is embracing true Christianity.

His most poignant comment is:  
"Parents should not be surprised. They cannot bring up one's children within earshot of the Gospel without paying for it."

Wow! Let me say that again.  
"Parents should not be surprised. They cannot bring up one's children within earshot of the Gospel without paying for it."

We have taught our children the Gospel, and when they are mature enough to embrace it, we reply, "Oh, but we need to be practical."  
"We need to be sensitive to the bottom-line", and so forth.

Young adults see the irony and hypocrisy, and they are frustrated with the existing, entrenched system.

~~~~~  
The Gospel message is wonderfully hopeful, restorative, and very risky.

The late, Fredrick Buechner described the Gospel as the "Great fairy tale that happens to be true."
~~~~~  
~~~~~

How to respond? ????
I will present some concepts and questions.

On Tuesday, there will be 158 of our chairs outside, set out along the curve of Benjamin Rd. They will represent those who died from toxic drugs in our region in 2021. Maybe a chair or two will be permanently borrowed. ??
How does that feel???

What if we put out a rainbow flag? It may provoke a negative reaction.
~~~~~

There is a housing shortage. Refugees cannot find a place to live. Our building has lots of rooms. What would it take to transform our space into temporary housing?

Dare we even consider that?  
How could we plan an event if “outsiders” are inside our place?

~~~~~  
Thousands of people visit the Farmers’ Market each week.
I wonder if there is an opportunity there?
Perhaps, we could build a labyrinth and a peace walk?

Ah, but all that is expensive and a lot of work.

~~~~~  
I thought about helping a refugee family, but I can’t afford to.  
I’m going to Ireland at the end of September.

~~~~~  
The Gospel is not an analgesic.
The Gospel tends to reveal the pain and the way to healing.

I suppose the big question is:
Are we willing to invite others in no matter the cost?
Do we want to sail into the unknown?

Or, are we more comfortable waving goodbye to our young adults as they leave us holding the weight?

~~~~~  
I’ll end with two Fredrick Buechner quotes.

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

People need people following the Gospel.

So, as Buechner said,  
“Go where your best prayers take you.”