

“THREE LITTLE SERMONS

for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2016

Text: Luke 14:1,7-14

This morning I am going to attempt a difficult feat. I will give you three sermons, using only the time I usually take to give you one. You can take your pick, in the end. I will recommend the third sermon, but you are free to take #1 or #2 if you like. All three sermons will be based on the gospel which is appointed for today: Luke 14:1,7-14.

I have given a different title to each of the sermons. The first one I will call “Get Serious.” The second is “Get Real.” The third is titled “Get Jesus.” (When I say “Get Jesus,” what I mean is “Get what Jesus is driving at.”)

Sermon #1: “Get Serious”

Jesus gives us two pieces of advice in this gospel reading. They are distinct but related.

First, he tells us something about how to be a guest when we are invited to a banquet. “Humble yourself” is a good way of summing it up. And the reason for humbling yourself, taking a seat in a lower place, is so that you will have the opportunity to be lifted up by your host in the eyes of others. This is the opposite of exalting yourself, which is a bad idea precisely because you may be humiliated by the host in front of others when he or she asks you to make room for a really important person.

That advice sounds like something I can live with, but the second advice is more difficult. Jesus says that when we are hosting a luncheon or dinner, “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors.” Instead, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Just as with the first advice, Jesus provides a rationale for what he commands us to do. You don’t want to have your hospitality requited, because then God will have

nothing to reward you for in the resurrection, since you will already be paid in full by their returning your generosity.

These two rules are quite clear. Jesus tells us point blank that we should humble ourselves and not exalt ourselves. Period. Do not blow your own horn. And he tells us with no equivocation, no exceptions, that we should not invite to a luncheon or dinner the very people we always invite. He does not say it would be nice to occasionally allow someone we don’t like to be added to our guest list. He says “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

There is a famous bumper sticker that says “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” Well, Jesus says to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” That settles it.

I warn you, this first sermon is coming to its close. I hope you are not waiting for some mitigation here. I hope you don’t expect me to hedge what Jesus does not hedge. Your Lord has spoken. Stop taking places of honor, stop asserting your prerogatives, start being truly humble and generous to those who need it most, and let God pay you back in the resurrection. In short, listen to what Jesus says, and get serious. Amen.

Sermon #2: “Get Real”

Jesus went to eat at the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, and the people were watching him closely.

Sure enough, Jesus spoke strongly about the topic at hand—hospitality and generosity.

And, while he spoke strongly, he certainly was aware that what he said was not something anyone could really do all the time.

For example, if everybody were to humble themselves all the time, and four cars came to a four-way stop at the same time, everybody would just sit there waving the others through, but nobody would go through first!

And so on. Life just would not work. People couldn't get jobs if they didn't assert that they were good enough. You have to stick up for yourself in court sometimes. You need to make claims on others. You have to seek justice for others, if not for yourself, and that always means insisting you are right.

So, Jesus knew you couldn't always take the lower seat (metaphorically) in life. But it's good if we keep in mind that Jesus likes us to be as humble as we can, realistically. We just have to keep an eye on ourselves, and operate with moderation in this area.

Likewise, Jesus never really meant we shouldn't have family over for lunch. Good grief! What a silly notion!

So, although that is what he said, he didn't really mean that. And he didn't mean the other part either, not literally, about always inviting to a banquet the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." If you did, pretty soon they would think you were required to do it and they would start getting presumptuous and demanding other things from you, and where would that end?

No, what Jesus really wants is for us to keep an eye on ourselves, and budget our hospitality so that we don't totally forget people who are needy. So, if we can find some ways to pay back God's goodness to us, that is quite enough, and Jesus will be cool with that. Besides, he doesn't expect perfection from us, because he knows we're sinful people with problems. Nobody could possibly fulfill what Jesus asks us to do here. Get real. So, keep these words of

Jesus in mind, but be realistic and not too hard on yourself. Amen.

Sermon #3: "Get Jesus"

Invited to eat at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, Jesus seized the opportunity to talk about himself.

Why? Because he always felt the pain of an observer who witnesses suffering and wants to help people with what is eating at them. In this case, he observed how people were being hurt by actions which were ostensibly good. Hospitality, generosity, yeah!! And yet, by choosing places of honor, guests were betraying the corruption of human society which ultimately is our downfall. We can't even do good without doing evil! His disciples (the guests) were jockeying for position at a meal where the guest of honor (Jesus) was the icon for humility. Sad. And Jesus commented.

But at the same time, in a brilliant word picture he signaled that there is a way out of the vicious cycle of hospitality and hurting, generosity and jealousy. "Let those who have ears hear," Jesus used to say. And if we have ears we will hear him telling two stories about himself. About how God in Christ is throwing open the doors to a banquet and inviting all the hurt people to come in and be fed. This is communion. This is church. This is the kingdom of God. All are welcome, all are precious, all are invited, all of us are being told "friend, come up higher," every time we gather to feast on the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He died to welcome us. He put himself lower so that we might have a higher place. He thereby delivers us from the frustrating "body of death."

His invitation bypasses completely the algorithms of self-justification, rules-following, even the rule of humility. He simply says to us, "Come to me."

Jesus did not come to double down on Moses. As Paul puts it, "For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death."

Free from the calculations and manipulations by which we try to put ourselves forward and lift ourselves up in God's esteem. We are invited. We come. We dine. With whoever. Amen.

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Sermon #1, "Get Serious," proclaimed the law of God. It is the truth. When we do not obey it, we hurt and we are hurt.

Sermon #2, "Get Real," proclaimed the false good news of hypocrisy. It hedged the truth, accepting and covering up sin and encouraged us to be only partly serious about some of what Jesus says.



Sermon #3, "Get Jesus," proclaimed the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Listening to Sermon #1 is a sure path to eventual despair; Sermon #2 leads quickly to pride; Sermon #3 is the only route to peace and joy in the Spirit.

Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen.

Amen.

