

“Setting One's Priorities” Luke 14:15-24 Trinity 2

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

“First things first.” That is a saying I have heard all of my life. It is all about setting one's priorities, to ensure the important things are done before the unimportant. The people in the story Jesus tells have lost their sense of priority.

To be honest, the parable is not properly understood without the context of the entire chapter of Luke in which it appears. Jesus is facing a test at the home of Pharisee to which He had been invited to eat. They bring a man in to see if Jesus will heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus asks them for their judgment in the situation, and they refuse to speak, so He heals the man. Then Jesus explains His action by asking them about which one of them would allow an ox or a son to fall into a well on the Sabbath, and not rescue it or him? Clearly, it is an issue of priorities: Sabbath Law or Ox or son? Just as clearly, Jesus expects them to choose the ox or the son, but to say so might be seen as blasphemy, so they keep silent.

Then Jesus talks about humility. He suggests that they not seek the place of honor when invited to a dinner, but take the lowest seat, and allow themselves to be honored by being moved up, rather than shamed by being made to give the place of honor to someone else, and thus be humiliated. Of course, there are risks with humility. Your host might not see anything amiss in your taking the place of least significance, and then you will find out where you really belong, in his estimation. The question is, which is more important, the place of honor with the risk of embarrassment, or the opportunity for recognition and honor with the risk of finding out that you do not merit any - but without the humiliation before others? Again, it is a question of setting priorities.

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Then Jesus tells the man who had invited Him that when he gives a luncheon, he should not invite family and friends, people he would like to impress who might also return the kindness of his invitation, but rather invite those who would have need of the invitation, and no means to repay his kindness - the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Jesus says that such kindness would be repaid by God at the resurrection. This presents another setting of priorities - good times and good will here and now, or later with the Lord.

At this point in the narrative, someone spouts off with the seemingly out-of-place comment, “Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Why say that now, in this place in the story? And why, in seeming response to the outburst, does Jesus tell the parable of the banquet spurned? Then it struck me. It is just like when I preach about how rich we are, and how God gives us our riches for His purposes, and I get the sort of responses that say, “There is nothing wrong with my going on vacation, or owning nice things, or visiting my children in another province. When you preach about how we use our time or our things, Pastor, you make me feel guilty. But I have every right to do with my life and my possessions what I please. You can't tell me I have to do this or that to go to heaven.” Of course, I cannot - and I really do not want to.

Jesus was talking about priorities, and confronting how everyone tends to deal with life, and with one another, and with God. He was explaining how God looked at things - the divine values and priorities, and the guy who shouted out the “Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” was trying to excuse their priorities, and dismiss what Jesus was saying by saying “We are all going to eat bread in the kingdom, and no one is going to be unhappy to be there, so what difference does it make if do this or that, how we manage the little stuff, or how we treat the poor?” It was a “Just get off our back!” kind

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of thing. Being Jews, you know, the Chosen People, they knew they were going to go to heaven, and they really wanted to pay more attention to life on earth, right now, and worry about heaven once they got there.

Jesus' response said, in effect, that might be true for those who are going to heaven - but how do you know that you are going to make it? Jesus took the presupposition which lay behind the man's statement, and told him the truth – showed him the truth about it and what it meant. Israel - as individuals, not as the entire nation - lived more or less just as the man had asserted. They lived like so many of us twenty-first century Christians live today; taking God and eternity for granted, and making the most of the day we live in, but according to the purposes of the flesh, not according to the purposes of God.

The moment came - and it is never at convenient time that it comes - and the call went out, the dinner is ready, everything is prepared, come to the feast. But those invited - the Chosen People - found themselves too wrapped up in the affairs of life to heed the invitation. Now, was the dinner less important than their excuses? I don't think so. It was just a matter of priorities. Israel had gotten so wrapped up in living in the blessings of God that they lost sight of both the Giver and of the purpose of the gifts. They didn't say they didn't want God or eternal life, they just wanted them on their terms and when they were ready. They forgot that love and hate in the sight of God is not the same as it is in our thoughts. With God it is a matter of setting priorities, and anything preferred to or more urgent than God means you love that thing and despise God.

Because they found everything more urgent and real than God and faith and salvation, they were found to be unworthy - and God went out and dragged the unworthy in and gave them the banquet.

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You and I are those blind, crippled, lame, and worthless people who just happen to have stumbled into the riches of life and salvation. We did not find it or choose it, but we were found in the hedges and the back-alleys of life and compelled to come in. That is the grace of God.

Jesus prepared the feast of salvation by His death on the cross for our sins, and dragged us into the dinner hall without asking our consent. See, the banquet rests on the table before you this morning! Here is life and salvation, forgiveness and peace, and resurrection and joy.

Of course, now that we have become the chosen ones, we also run the risk of taking it for granted, and finding other things more exciting - and more urgent - and more pleasurable, and skipping the meal anyhow. But this parable does not tell you ‘to beware’, it tells you of the wonderful grace of God in bringing you into this banquet of life and forgiveness and peace and salvation, so that you may rejoice and give thanks!

It is about setting priorities. The argument about priorities is not with me, or with Jesus. It is an argument with your flesh. God will not be put in second place, and salvation will not wait for you to exercise your perfect rights as a Canadian to have and to do and to go and to enjoy. If there are more urgent things in your life, well, then there are more urgent things in your life. We ask nothing you cannot freely give or do. The Lord loves a cheerful giver.

But remember, while everyone in heaven is going to be delighted to be there, not everyone who thinks they are going will end up in heaven. Those who take it so much for granted that they can count other things more precious or more urgent run the risk of finding that the call to the banquet that they were waiting for came while they were busy with something else - too busy to come to the banquet.

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Look at what you've got. Count the blessedness of being dragged in, unworthy though we are, to the banquet of Salvation. Give thanks, and keep your wits about you. You are chosen for something you don't deserve, but you really want and need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.