

Pentecost 12, September 1, 2019

(Lk 14:1, 7-14; Ps 112; Prov 25:6-7; Heb 13:1-8, 15-16)

In the wealthy section of a large city there's a beautiful church, First Lutheran. They have the best choir in the community, accompanied by a brand new pipe organ played by an outstanding musician. Their visual arts are eye-catching and change with every season. No one ever sleeps through the sermons, because the pastor is a great orator and holds everyone spellbound. Everyone who's anyone attends one of the Sunday services there. It's almost a badge of honor to be able to say, "Oh, yes, my family has been members of First Lutheran for generations!"

Downtown in the same city is a small congregation called Fourth Lutheran. It's a new congregation on fire for mission and ministry. They purchased an old grocery store that had to close, one of those mom-and-pop outfits that went under because of all the megastores around now.

Members and visitors of Fourth Lutheran worship in the gymnasium they built in the old store, lined on the sides with bleachers donated by a school. Music is provided by an old keyboard or a guitar, and the pastor preaches from a music stand.

After worship on Sunday there's a pick-up game of basketball or volleyball that anyone can join in. You never know who'll show up. The church is right around the corner from a homeless shelter, and a lot of rough-looking folks come for the breakfast served before the service starts. After the game there's a Bible study while people cool off, and then a potluck luncheon provided by members for all their guests.

You couldn't find a bigger contrast between two churches than between First and Fourth Lutheran. First brags about being a friendly, welcoming congregation, but there's no way the homeless from the shelter would feel comfortable there. Fourth doesn't brag about anything. They just invite all people to come and worship God together and then share food and fellowship. – Which church do you think Jesus would've gone to?

It's human nature to want to be "first," isn't it? At least it must be a *cultural* necessity—just watch TV or listen to the radio or read the billboards: You should be first, best, biggest, prettiest, best-dressed, newest, fastest, most popular, most sexy, richest. . . .

Jesus, on the other hand, gives an example of *humility*. **Don't sit at the head of the table, because someone of higher standing than you might come and humiliate you by sending you down to the foot.** *Hey, you, get off that cushion and let Zebulun sit there!*

This is what humility looks like: *NOT* sitting down low hoping to be invited up higher, but sitting at the bottom because you know you've done nothing to deserve a better place. That's how to be a gracious *guest* at a banquet, says Jesus. So if we get invited to that wedding banquet put on by the Pharisee, we'll know how to behave.

But now it gets tough for the *host*, the *Pharisee*. **Be careful**, says Jesus, **not to invite anyone who can return the favor. Be careful to invite only those who have nothing to offer in return: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.** Or he might say to us today, invite the *homeless man, the abusive woman, the drug addict, the alcoholic, the teen who just got out of juvenile hall.*

Invite *those* people, says Jesus, because they can't possibly repay you. Do it out of the goodness of your heart, and you'll get your reward from God at the last judgment.

All of a sudden the story has taken an unexpected twist. Instead of worrying about where to sit, we might be worrying about getting into the banquet all at! What if we don't even make the cut?

Relax and rejoice! Here the parable of the banquet gives way to the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. *Everyone* is invited to the party! That's the real point of this parable. Like **the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind**, we've *all* been invited to the party! We're on the guest list only because of Jesus' death and resurrection, and God's steadfast love and mercy.

It's hard for us to give up our system of accounting. We try to keep track of who's in and who's out; who's good and who's bad; who's worthy and who's not; who's successful and who's lazy; who's rich and who's poor; who's strong and who's weak; who meets our expectations and who doesn't.

God stopped that kind of accounting the day the Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, along with all our pride and arrogance, our shame and guilt and pettiness. So *everyone* is invited to the eternal party!

Jesus died for the sake of all sinners—that would be *all people*. He gives himself freely to everyone who comes to his table to receive his body and blood. He feeds us regardless of our gender, race, ethnic roots, profession, income, strength, IQ, education. There's no distinction. We're *all* saved by grace through faith.

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With that in mind, think back for a moment to First Lutheran and Fourth Lutheran Church. If Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, is there anyone—anyone at all—who *wouldn't* be welcome here at St. John/St. Stephen?

Thanks be to God!