**“Our Place at the Table”**

A homily by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

Last weekend at this time, I was still sleeping – recovering celebrating my sister’s wedding out in the California wine country. Both she and her, now husband, Dan are extroverts, and so they have many friends – so this was not a small wedding. But they are also both very good managers of details, and so throwing a destination wedding for 180 was right up their alley. In all their wedding preparations, the thing that most impressed me – other than their commitment to working hard during their pre-marital sessions – was their seating chart. This was no sketch on the back of a paper napkin. Rather this was a complex Excel Spreadsheet with color coding and real-time links to a graphical representation of the table layout and seating. Clearly they had put hours and hours of time and thought into this, mostly, of course, in an effort to be hospitable to their guests. But when I read the Gospel for this Sunday, I couldn’t help but laugh at the irony that 2000 years later, we are still all so concerned with where we sit at large banquets, with ensuring that each person has a place, and knows where it is!

Today’s Gospel is one of many in which Jesus uses the setting of a large banquet or community meal to reflect on the differences between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humanity. As we know from our regular encounters with the Bible, the Kingdom of God is a place of radical equality, where each person’s equal inherent worth is matched by an equality in social standing. And as we know from being alive in the world, in the Kingdom of humanity, there certainly is not equality of social position for all people, and in fact, in various times and places even the equality of every person’s inherent worth is called into question. We know this is true when we see workers on strike because they can’t seem to earn more than $15,000 a year working full time. We know this is true, when we see Christians and others in Syria being attacked with chemical weapons by their own leaders. We know this is true, when it has been only 50 years since the government ended legalized racial segregation in this country, and only 50 days since the federal government has affirmed marriage equality.

The Kingdom of God is always trying to break into the kingdom of humanity, drawing the latter closer and closer to the former. And Jesus’ teaching and parables about the kingdom of God, are meant to help us, as his followers to be active in our own lives in promoting that effort.

The two parables that Jesus tells today are quite similar – one a parable is about being a guest, the other about being a host; but they have the same message about how to be a holy person within the Kingdom of God. In both little parables Jesus is essentially contrasting two different human motivations: the quest for power and the quest for glory. Though we often say these words in the same breath, they don’t mean the same thing.

The quest for power is about seeking authority, influence, and ultimately, control, over other human beings. It is essentially a trajectory of upward mobility. The quest for glory is about seeking accolades not from other people, but from God. The quest for glory is the quest for humility, self-sacrifice, generosity and self-giving. It is an outlook on life driven not by upward mobility, but by downward mobility. Glory cannot be bestowed by those above you on the food chain in life, but only by those below you. It is there that our focus must be directed.

This is Jesus’ point in both parables: that our lives, if they are to be truly holy, must be motivated not by the quest for power but by the quest for glory. That’s why he chides the guests at the Pharisee’s banquet in their polite but narcissistic jockeying for social position as they rearrange the seating cards at the banquet. And it is why he warns those who host such splendid gatherings that they must invite not their friends and relatives and neighbors and colleagues, but strangers, the impure, the diseased and the socially undesirable to sit at their table.

When you stop and think about it, this latter request seems just patently absurd. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to attend my sister’s wedding surrounded not by our extended family and friends, neighbors, and other well-loved people – but instead by the farmers, grape-pickers, hotel maids, and local drunks of Sonoma county. It’s basically unthinkable. And yet, this, Jesus suggests is what life in the Kingdom of God is like. A banquet that you attend with a far wider circle of humanity than you would ever consciously choose to associate with.

Each Sunday, when we enact the heavenly banquet together, the Holy Meal of bread and wine, we must imagine ourselves eating at this kind of enlarged table. We must imagine ourselves kneeling at the rail, not just with our friends and neighbors, our fellow parishioners, but with all Episcopalians in our Diocese, in this country, around the world. And indeed, not just Episcopalians, but all Christians, perhaps even, all people of faith and good will who are indeed children of God. And in fact, not just all those who fall into these wider categories who are alive today, but all the saints of God through all time and space. When we make Eucharist, when we celebrate the holy meal of God’s Kingdom, the guest list includes them as well.

Do we choose to invite such a wide circle into our hearts when we feast at the table of God’s kingdom? Do we imagine receiving communion alongside someone in part of the body of Christ we usually don’t see?

Our call as Christians is to a life of downward mobility – to live closer to the earth, closer to each other, closer to those whom society either rejects or simply ignores. This is the way into heaven, not just in the hereafter, but in the here and now. For if the kingdom of this world is so full of inequality today, the only way for it to be transformed into the radically equal kingdom of God is through our witness, our effort, and our commitment to orienting our lives and our hearts not upward but downward.

I’m so pleased that many of us have spent time doing that this summer, either through our parish outreach efforts feeding families at the Plaza Hotel on Mondays for lunch for the past three months, or else participating in the B-SAFE program in Dorchester in July. There are I’m sure countless other ways in which you have each in some small fashion this summer cast your gaze beyond the usual crew, reached out to a stranger or less than desirable neighbor to offer companionship, recognition, compassion, friendship.

As this new year begins, let us commit ourselves to this tenant of our faith. To be downwardly mobile. To look for God beyond the normal places. To avoid seeking power through control and authority, but rather to seek glory in humility and compassion. And perhaps, through our own commitment to the pursuit of glory over power, we can encourage others in this world, in places high and low, to do the same. Amen.