

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“Sacrifices Pleasing To God”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, September 1, 2019

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour; in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Let us pray. Living God, may we know your Holy Spirit with us. May we listen, may we hear the word that you would have us hear. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. For you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning, they were assigned to us by the common lectionary for this Sunday, read throughout churches through the world. Both lessons are filled with invitations to us. Or it might be more appropriate to say, "Exhortations to us." Exhortations to do good and to do the right thing. "When you are invited to a wedding banquet," Jesus said, "go and sit at the lowest place. And if you give a banquet," he said, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Likewise, the writer of Hebrews - Hebrews a new testament book - "Let mutual love continue," he said. "Do not neglect to show [hospitality rangers?]. Remember those who are in prison, remember those who are being tortured. Keep your lives free from the love of money. Let marriage be held in honor among all. The bottom line," concludes this writer, "is this: do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have. For such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Now it's important, I think, for us to see in these two scripture lessons that the examples they're in constitute people who are in the margins of the society in which Jesus lived. The "down and out," we might say. Invite them to dinner. Lift them up. Sharing what you have. Sacrifices which are pleasing to God. Now the word sacrifice, I think, in our time has a little different nuance than

in the biblical text. I think it means primarily for us that we voluntarily do something that costs us something. That might be difficult for us, that might not be easy for us to do. "It's a sacrifice," we say. Now that might be slightly different from what we encounter in the biblical text. Throughout the bible, sacrifice refers to ritual, and to worship practice, to burnt offerings made on the altar of the Temple. All of these practices are set forth in the Torah or the Book of Law of the Hebrew people the first five books of the Bible. But later in their history, these practices for the people had become mostly rote kinds of practices and they were performed as if somehow doing all of this fulfilled the law, fulfilled their obligations. And yet they were ignoring the weightier issues of justice and mercy. So the biblical prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Micah, Amos, and the others, the biblical prophets protested vigorously and they invade against what they called solemn assemblies, the burnt offerings, the sacrifices in the temple while at the same time ignoring and neglecting justice, trampling on the poor as Amos put it, turning away from righteousness. It is this theme of justice and of caring love and of doing good upon which the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament, this is what he picks up. For this writer earlier in his book, Jesus who demonstrated through his sacrifice the very depth of God's love for us, Jesus, according to him is our great High Priest. Our great High Priest who is sacrificed for us. And in response, in response for that grace and forgiveness that is showered upon our lives, we are called upon to do good and to share what we have that those are the sacrifices which are pleasing to God.

Now there are many keys I think to this kind of life but perhaps one of them, this kind of life that is turned toward justice and goodness as we seek to follow Jesus, one of them is to be alert for opportunities to do kindness and mercy. For actions that demonstrate God's justice and God's compassion. You see to see others, not just with a passing glance but to see others for what might be needed to see a situation for what might be needed and how we might become a conduit, a channel if you will for God's love and peace. I'm sure you recall the hymn Make Me a Channel of Your Love and of Your Peace. The Reverend Heidi Neumark, who's a Lutheran Pastor and served a church in the South Bronx, I've mentioned her before from this pulpit, perhaps you remember. She wrote a book called Breathing Space, the book that chronicles her time at this church in the South Bronx. And in this book she tells of a time and event in the summer of 97. Now the church had a chance to send some of their boys to a camp. A two-week experience that was developed by the National Lutheran Church and it was aimed particularly at African-American boys between 10 and 18. And in the two weeks in which they were at the camp, these boys would be guided by young African-American men in their 20's and 30's, all of whom had gone through intensive training to become mentors and to become role models for these boys. The stated mission by the Lutheran Church, stated mission of the endeavor was to be "For those two weeks an afro-centric community grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ that create space for listening, teaching and responding to the needs of these young boys, to rescue their gifts, to release their potential and to restore their promise." Mind you, it was aimed at mainly those that lived in the inner city.

Now the camp used a facility in Iowa. So the problem, as you might guess, the problem facing the South Bronx Church was how they were going to get the boys in their church that have been invited to this camp. How they were going to get them there and how they were going to get them back. Certainly, their parents could in no way transport them. Most of them didn't own cars. Most of them had jobs that they had to be-- they had to be at their job. So how to get them there from New York to Iowa? Now they had a seminary intern that year and he volunteered. His name was Chris. He said he could drive one of the cars. And then his father, Larry, wanting, of course, to be supportive of his son's intern ministry at this church, his father, Larry, volunteered. Decided he would drive his van from his home in Minnesota to New York, then to Iowa, then back to Minnesota, then back Iowa, then back to New York. I mean, you get the picture. Chris' mother, [Ivone?], decided to go with him.

Now it was, of course, in the church understood why Larry was doing this. That he wanted to be supportive of his son's intern ministry at the church that summer. But that turned out not to be the end of the story. Not for Larry and [Ivone?] and not for their son Chris. Long after Chris was gone as the summer intern at that church, they volunteered all three of them, each summer to take boys to this camp. Repeating this trip every summer. And one of the last years of doing this, one of the boys named [Larny?], he'd gone several years, and he took Larry aside and he asked him with a quizzical look in his eye, he ask him, "Mr. Kenny, why do you do this?" And before Larry could answer, Lonnie went on, "Why do you like us so much?" This kid had a really tough life. His own father had been killed in prison. And not only that, but some kids back in his school at the Bronx, teased him, even bullied him because he was overweight and he had a lisp, all of which, as we know, unfortunately, can be fodder for cruel behavior and jokes. And he looks at Larry and he says, "Why do you like us so much?" Now, Larry, could at this point, have talked about love of Jesus in a general way and could have quoted scripture, I'm afraid that's what I might have done. But instead, Larry answered by talking about Lonnie, very directly to him in a very specific way, mentioning all of the good and unique qualities he had noticed in this kid over the years. When he finished, Lonnie looked back at him with amazement in his eyes, and he said, "You noticed all of that? You noticed all of that in me?" "Yes." Larry said.

Larry noticed more than that. He took the time, placed himself in the orbit and space of that kid and he saw him, truly saw him. Small gesture perhaps, but wouldn't you agree with me most likely a huge part of the rescue of that kid.? We have to admit there's a world of distance between the lives of Larry and Vaughn and Lonnie on the other. And it's not just the distance between Minnesota and the South Bronx. But now because of trips from New York to a camp in Iowa, and back, and a willingness to look for. To look for and notice goodness, gifts, unique qualities in this kid. There's a world of connection as well. It is the beginning of the creation of beloved community. Sacrifices that are pleasing to God. Kindness, loving outreach to those who may not be like us, acts of Kindness, for example, that heal and comfort sick children, and that welcome the desperate. Not fear or rejection or hostility or hatred. There's way too much of that in our world. Way too much violence and hatred and meanness. Places like Odessa and El Paso, we know this. In loving and forgiving us. The Christ calls us to a life of compassion and of service, calls us to sacrifices that are pleasing to God. Amen