

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 28, 2022 – 12 Pentecost
Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Luke 14:1, 7-14
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The Old Testament Book of Proverbs is an anthology of wise advice about how to live and act in the world, in personal relationships, and in community. This book of wisdom is meant to guide people – in some cases young people in particular – to live righteously and prudently and to avoid the perennial pitfalls of life that, in the end, lead to more trouble than pleasure. Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, especially religious leaders such as the Pharisees, would have been very familiar with the Book of Proverbs.

Jesus had been invited to the home of a leader of the Pharisees for a Sabbath meal. The description in Luke's Gospel suggests that this was an important occasion with an impressive guest list. Jesus observes other guests choosing the places of honor for themselves. He then tells a parable that is very similar to these words of wisdom from the Book of Proverbs, our Old Testament lesson this morning: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble" (Proverbs 25:6-7). Jesus takes the lesson from Proverbs and applies it to the present circumstance, giving it new words: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

It is important to note that Luke tells us Jesus "told them a parable." That is a signal that he will be speaking about the kingdom of God. Jesus isn't, in effect, saying, if you want to be ultimately exalted, then act as if you are humble and take the lowest seat at a dinner party. That's just a self-serving and worldly strategy. He is talking about the kingdom of God, where those who are truly humble in relation to God and their neighbors are now and will be the exalted ones, while those who are self-interested and lord it over others will be brought low. This is the same message of reversal that we see often in Luke's gospel, one that we hear in pregnant Mary's words to her cousin Elizabeth: "[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53).

Jesus goes on to address his host, again moving from human wisdom to divine wisdom, from the ways of the world to the ways of God's kingdom. He tells his host not to offer hospitality to people who can return the favor. Instead, invite those who cannot – the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. When Jesus says, "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous," he is once again conveying wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs: "He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to the Lord; [the Lord] will repay him his due" (Proverbs 19:17).

We may assume that Jesus' fellow-guests were the sort of people who could return the Pharisee's hospitality, not the sort who could not. To his host, the banquet Jesus proposed would seem ludicrous, perhaps even appalling. Imagine that you are planning a family wedding. Your guest list includes your relatives as well as the friends you generally socialize with, people like yourself in important ways. Then Jesus comes along, looks at the list, and says, "No, don't invite those people because they'll invite you to their family weddings. Invite the kind of people who can't afford to give a party, who might not even be able to get to your party without assistance. God will repay you for your hospitality to those guests." Would you change your guest list? And if you did, would you be willing to take the consequences?

All through the Bible we read about righteousness. What do we learn about being righteous in this morning's psalm (112)? "The righteous are merciful and full of compassion," "their heart is right; they put their trust in the Lord," "they have given freely to the poor." Being righteous is to have one's will aligned with God's will. To be like God in the sense of living as people who have been made in God's image. God is generous to all God's creatures, good and bad. God is merciful and compassionate. God is trustworthy. God loves freely.

God calls us to this kind of righteousness and to humility. The culture we live in encourages us to think of ourselves first, to spend our money and our time on ourselves, to be concerned about what other people think of us. Even in the church there is an emphasis on the question, "How will the church survive?" Jesus turns all this upside down by calling us to remember God and God's kingdom. God and God's kingdom always come first if we want to be on the right track in our souls and in our lives. We may think of our spiritual journey as a kind of radical reorientation: to turn from a preoccupation with ourselves to God, from a preoccupation with ourselves to concern for our neighbors, to grow in love and in faith, and to find opportunities to put our love and faith into action. Every day we have many opportunities to practice this turning, blessed opportunities to love.

I'd like to look ahead for a moment to the next five weeks, which have been designated by the church as the Season of Creation. Each week we will be honoring God's creation in our liturgy, in hymns and prayers. We will also be reminded of our responsibility to care for God's creation, especially given the current crises of climate change and environmental degradation.

Humility before God is deeply connected to our care for God's creation. Next week copies will be available of a document passed by the House of Bishops at the General Convention last month entitled "Expressing the Mind of the House on Climate and Our Vocation in Christ." It begins as follows: "God is the source of all creation, and we, humankind – made in God's image – have been given the gift of life and responsibility to care for creation. We depend on God's creation to sustain our life together, and, by serving as good stewards of creation, we reflect God's tender love for all that has been made. In caring for our earth, we return our love to God."

Humility before God involves recognizing our right relation to God, as creatures to our Creator, as creatures made and sustained by God, not by ourselves. Humility before God involves seeing others as fellow creatures of God, who – like us – are made in God's image. Humility before God involves accepting God's vision of creation – that it is good and that we are meant to love and care for the world God made, with thankful and compassionate hearts.

Humility is a tall order in our culture. We are constantly encouraged to focus on ourselves rather than God, and we are surrounded by people who do not see life and the world as we who follow Jesus see them. Let us pray that our merciful God will help us to live as we are meant to live and become who we are meant to become, to the glory of God. Amen.