St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 31, 2025 – 12 Pentecost
Sirach 10:12-18; Psalm 112; Luke 14:1, 7-14
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If you have ever wondered why people in positions of religious and worldly power were deeply offended by the teaching of Jesus, why they banded together to do him great harm, then pay attention to the Gospel readings we have been considering in recent weeks, today, and in the weeks coming soon! Especially in the Gospel of Luke we see clearly how Jesus challenged the people of his time to turn their understanding of life "on its head." Jesus says, in effect, "Stop looking at life the way the world sees life. Look at life the way God sees life!" Jesus challenges each of us who follow him and the church as a body now, in the very same way. It is up to us to decide to accept or reject the Rabbi's lessons.

In today's lesson we read that Jesus had been invited to the home of a religious leaderfor a Sabbath meal. The description in Luke's Gospel suggests that this was an important occasion with an impressive guest list. The host may very well have been proud of himself because important people – including Jesus – had accepted his invitation. Jesus observes guests choosing the places of honor for themselves. This is a perfect "teaching moment" about pride and humility. Jesus tells a parable.

When Jesus tells a parable, he uses familiar human events to speak about the kingdom of God. In this parable about a wedding banquet 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. 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.

To take the place of honor for oneself reveals something important about one's heart, one's character; it reveals pride. As today's lesson from the book of Sirach puts it: "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker" (10:12). The proud person has forgotten that he or she is a creature of God, equal to all God's human creatures. Jesus is speaking about God's action when he says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The great reversal of the world in God's kingdom.

Ola Belle Reed was an American folk singer, song writer and banjo player. She was born in 1916 in the mountains of North Carolina. She wrote a song in the bluegrass gospel tradition called "Six Feet of Earth Makes Us All of One Size." The lyrics refer to the words of Jesus to his disciples found in Matthew's Gospel (10:40, 42): "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me…. And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these [followers of mine] in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Here are the words of Ola Belle Reed's song:

"A cup of cold water in charity given
is remembered with joy in the skies.
We all are but human, and we all have to die
And six feet of earth will make us all of one size.
Though a man be in tattering rags

We should never reject or despise
For beneath there's a true honest heart
And six feet of earth will make us all of one size.

Some people gain fortune and fame
While others try hard but can't rise
Above degradation and shame
Still…six feet of earth will make us all of one size."

Jesus calls us to remember this truth before we're "six feet under." Why? Well, it's one way to learn compassion for our fellow human creatures, compassion which leads to action to help relieve human suffering in the name of the Man who brought good news to the poor. In his book "God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time," Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote "our God is the God of Underdogs, who will not let us forget the widow and orphan. Our God is a God who has a bias for the weak, and we who worship this God, who have to reflect the character of this God, have no option but to have a like special concern for those who are pushed to the edges of society… We must be where Jesus would be" (page 66).

After telling his parable, Jesus addresses his host, continuing his lesson about the ways of the world in contrast to the ways of God's kingdom. "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, 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." Jesus refers here to 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, probably 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? Could you face the reactions of the friends and family you didn't invite?

All through the Bible we read about righteousness. 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. 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." God is merciful and compassionate, generous, and faithful. We are called to reflect these qualities of God in our lives.

Jesus always beckons us to remember God and God's kingdom. If we want to be on the right track in our souls and in our lives, God and God's kingdom need to come first. It is our spiritual journey to turn from ourselves to God, from ourselves to our neighbors, to grow in love and in faith and in humility. Every day we have many opportunities to practice this turning, blessed opportunities to love and serve God and our neighbors. May God help us become the people God wants us to be, by God's grace and in Jesus' name. Amen.