

Maple Grove 8/28/2022

David Kushner

Luke 14:1-14

The Bible is perhaps best understood as meditation literature. In brief, these texts are made to be meditated on, contemplated by Communities of Faith, and in so doing we are shaped and formed, and grow in our identity—both as communities, and as individuals.

--The Gospel of Luke puts some high significance on the meaning of Sabbath for the new Christian (largely non-Jewish) community. So let's first consider the significance of Sabbath.

--What is Sabbath: rule/Law to cease from work on the “seventh” day.

--Sabbath calls us to behave like God

--God worked for 6 days, then rested; so we work and rest.

--Because we are formed in the Image of God, we are to behave like God

--so what is God like? ... well that is a larger matter—perhaps which comes into better focus as we move on.

--Sabbath reminds us of our contingency on God—because we are in God's Image we depend upon God for our sustenance.

--Sabbath practices the hope of an egalitarian community. It reminds us that because we are all in God's image, the rich, the poor, even slaves and aliens, are to rest, and all be reminded they too behave like God and bear God's image. And in the largeness of God's blessing upon us, we extend our wealth to ensure the rest and feasting of the marginal among us—as God has done for us.

--with this in mind, the Sabbath can be imagined as a time where we ritually imagine and inhabit the prophetic reality of all people together acting as God acts, regarding one another as co-inheritors of God's image and presence in this world, enjoying together the bounty that blesses the rich and the poor, indiscriminately

--Sabbath is a picture of God's way in the world where the Last are made First, and the First/Last.

--For these reasons, it was mandated as an essential part of their identity for the Community of Faith to rest from work on the Sabbath, and to enjoy the bounty of life lived together. And it is within this context that we return to Luke's ruminations on the lord of the sabbath.

--is it lawful to do the work of healing on the Sabbath? The religious leaders previously have challenged Jesus on this point before (Chapter 13), and here Jesus inverts the situation calling on them to answer.

--Now we know that there are very serious laws and customs built around the tradition of honoring Sabbath, so it is no simple thing for a leader, whose identity, authority, and position are wrapped up in the maintenance of this to answer.

--This is a litmus test. To answer this wrong is to risk exclusion from God's people. Will we give the wrong answer, saying it is OK to violate Sabbath? Do we run the risk of encouraging all the people to simply do as they will—like children, or is it better and even more caring to admonish the crowds to do what is “right”?

--It is worth asking ourselves what litmus tests we confront today: Can those who are more conservative or liberal than us truly worship together? Can gays and lesbians have full inclusion in the Church?

--Jesus' response is that the Law of God is not simply about Rule Keeping, it is about People Keeping. We know we honor the Law of God if our actions bring life, healing, restoration and liberation. If our insistence upon a “right” way to be results in the alienation or hurt of others, it is not born from God's law.

--Jesus behaves like God, bringing new life and healing so that another human can truly have rest upon the Sabbath.

--and so we see that Luke shows us: to be like Jesus is to honor the law of God. And to honor the laws of God is to participate in the healing of this world. We recognize and restore the image of God in one another, and we discover that God's love empowers us.

--This sounds nice, and right—and it IS! But there is also a parable here. And parables have a way of catching us out. We often come to a parable feeling like we are on the side of God, and we often walk away troubled, unsure in some ways. Often we are simultaneously comforted and joyous, and also profoundly challenged by an ever higher call.

--We should embrace these ambiguities and meditate upon them, allowing the ways of God to ever speak to us, teach us, and challenge us.

--So Jesus here tells a parable and gives what seems to simply be wise advice. Don't show up at a feast and assume the seat of highest honor: Just think how shameful and embarrassing it will be to be moved down the row! Rather, be wise, seek the lower seat, and then you will be honored when the host invites you close. Honestly, pretty good advice.

--Have you ever been at an awards ceremony and felt convinced that the anonymous person they are describing is yourself? I have. Nearly any time anyone is going to be honored—even if I know the honor has nothing to do with me—I believe that they will call out my name, thank me for being generally awesome, and send me on my way to the great applause and admiration of everyone. Perhaps this is just me. Not so bad when that aspiration lives only in our head—but woe to me if I stand up and start walking to the podium before the announcement is made! It is much safer to remain Walter Mitty and dream my days away—So I heed Jesus’ advice on such occasions.

--But on a more serious note, these Sabbath meals, like most sacrifices in the Bible, are a way of sharing with others the blessings God has given: so much that it allows us to take a whole day off from work. What better way to Honor God than to throw a big, rich expensive feast!?! and I can invite all those pretenders who think THEY’VE been blessed! So I use the feast that celebrates our common humanity, and God’s generosity, and I use that feast to esteem myself most—to make sure everyone knows I’ve been blessed more than them. Maybe I gain favor and stature. I ensure myself a nice seat when my rival throws his own feast. Suddenly this feast becomes an insidious thing; a celebration of hoarding and avarice. And I have the GALL to challenge whether Jesus’ healing is lawful? When my very actions celebrate hoarding, social posturing and self-protection, and deny the full humanity of those who suffer, and suffer from want who are near me... well. Well, what is that?

--So we can see a bit of what Jesus is on about here. Good thing I know better than to seek honor for myself. Good thing I would never openly oppress another person to make my own feast grander. And good thing I would never do that in God’s name.

--Well...at least not today, but maybe I will tomorrow. By wrestling with the reality that I am very much still a broken, fragile person, who still strives to gain honor, security and admiration, I may be molded into a humbler, more loving ambassador of Jesus’ love.

--Jesus’ parable commends us to invite the poor, the lame, the alien to our table and let them enjoy in the goodness of God’s blessing. It seems that only here, where there can be no expectation of repayment, do we honor the Image of God.

--Now if you know you will come to a party you would not be accorded honor in keeping with your person, would you even attend? Would I participate in a church where I know that those less educated, less socially well-healed, or less theologically correct might be honored more highly than I? Would I stay in a church run by fishermen?

--The world would say we should seek like-minded fellows, but Jesus calls the basis of our like-mindedness to be in a loving humility. Don’t seek the honor and security of

being in the “right” group; rather find your security in behaving like God, who loves and restores all Humans, and through this love helps make us whole. What of that?

--Our categories of honor are perhaps different these days, and so we really must meditate upon the truths of these stories. We should allow them to challenge us, we should discuss and debate them with one another in communities of trust and faith, we should wrestle with God in the silence of our souls.

---We will often feel to have failed, or that we are incapable of such a high calling, and just then we may feel the uplifting arms of God’s love and acceptance of us, or an opportunity to be a vessel of God’s love toward an enemy, or another who could never repay you.

--It is in this vulnerability that we discover truly who we are: contingent beings, loved, fragile and formed together into a community that reflects God’s love, an alternative reality; a prophetic community that continually reminds us and the world that there is a New way; a way of being Truly Human.

--Consider what is perhaps the oldest hymn of the early church, from the letter to the Philippians: “Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead, he emptied himself taking on the form of a servant, even unto death. Therefore we are called to do nothing out of selfish ambition, or vain conceit—but rather consider others before yourself. Look to others’ interests, not merely your own.”

--Jesus shows us, and challenges us, what it looks like to behave like God. We do not have to constantly strive and seek position, security, and honor; we do not have to worry about always having the moral or intellectual high ground.

--If we know we are made in God’s Image, and we love those near us as those who also bear God’s Image, we will fulfill God’s law, and we will experience the Sabbath rest. A Rest from so much striving and hate that is the World.

--I certainly have not exhausted the truths of even this passage; together though we may go forth as contemplatives in action, meditating on the ways of Jesus’ kingdom, and bringing healing and love to a world in desperate need of a true Sabbath.

--I pray that we each bear in our hearts the challenge Jesus puts before us. Let us carry the challenge and not grow complacent; rather, regularly meditating and discovery where God’s call upon us can form into ever more loving and humble Humans: May our lives bear our God’s presence in this world.