

“Blessings Through the Strange and the Strangers”  
Sermon delivered 8/29/10  
Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Neal Collins, Pastor

**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. <sup>7</sup>When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. <sup>8</sup>When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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 honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. <sup>11</sup>For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." <sup>12</sup>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 neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup>And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

**Fitting In**

On a surface level, the Gospel today is self-explanatory. We know and fully understand the challenge of belonging, being accepted, having a sense of value, of importance and significance. I suspect our children have a sense of anxiety about the first day of school, and fitting in with their classmates by wearing the right clothes, having the right cell phone, and possessing all of the things that will give them honor over shame. Honor saying one has value, and shame denying any value. We all want to fit in, be comfortable, and not embarrassed when it comes to our social world. We all hope on some level to experience life as a blessing. We want what Jesus wants for us, the abundant life, but we interpret this in a different way than Jesus presents it. In the midst of fitting in, belonging, and having our place in the world comes the Gospel of the Lord this morning inviting us to re-evaluate our understanding of “blessing” and how we seek blessings in our lives.

I suspect many Pastors struggle, like I struggle, with a congregation of highly successful people like you. You are bright, articulate, competent, and for the most part, self-sufficient. Would you agree? Anyone here disagree? Now the challenge for me is as someone said, “I can proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in the midst of death. I can proclaim the Good News to those of you who are broken with sin and guilt by pronouncing God’s forgiveness of your sins. However, I struggle with what is the Good News of Jesus Christ for you who are wealthy, healthy, have community, are not burdened with guilt or shame, and who seem to be living the blessed life. Where does the Good News of Jesus Christ fit into your life? What brings you here this morning? What is God for you? What is the added value for the presence of God in your life?

### **Pecking Order**

This question presented itself to me this week in reading and re-reading the Gospel this morning. What was the added value to inviting Jesus for dinner? Jesus challenged the prevailing notions that the Pharisees held about God, the Sabbath, and the poor. I raise this question because, at the time of Jesus, one would invite those who would be most likely to reciprocate. A meal often reflected one's social status with the seating order. If you go to a symphony, the first chair violinist reflects a higher standing than the third chair. We all understand pecking orders. Every institution is endowed and confers status from Generals to Privates, Department Heads to Adjuncts, Bishops to Acolytes, and Supreme Court Justice to the local magistrate. Pecking orders provide security, status, and significance on many different levels. Jesus upsets this pecking order with a parable of shame, humiliation, and honor in asking those who sat higher in the pecking order to step down for another. In seeking a place of honor they have set themselves up for humiliation. Jesus again, challenges the prevailing notion of what it means to be blessed.

Jesus strips away the veneer of our constructs to make room for God's kingdom in our lives. He heals on the Sabbath, tells stories from the workers getting paid for working in the hot sun all day the same as those working for an hour, tells stories upsetting the apple cart of life and kicking down the house of cards.

### **Eat, Pray, Love**

The Christian Century magazine this last week addressed the faith of American Teenagers as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* by Kendra Dean, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. If teenagers were to write a creed reflecting this religious outlook, they would write a "God who created the world, wants people to be nice and fair, the purpose of life is to be happy, God is not involved in life except when you need him to solve a problem, and good people go to heaven when they die." (P.22) Dean concluded these teenagers mirror the religious lives of their parents. Dean presents this as a view held by teenagers but this creed could have been written by many in our society, not just the parents. No mention of taking up a cross, laying down one's life, turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, doing it unto the least of these. The heart of a life we all want prescribed by Jesus is different than the one described in the creed of these young people.

It isn't just the young in our society. But the middle aged and middle class who have difficulty laughing because life is so serious. After scanning the book *Eat, Pray, and Love* I went to see the movie this last week. For those of you who haven't read the book or seen the movie, it is a story by Elizabeth Gilbert, composed of 108 short chapters in the life of a woman who, on the surface, appeared to have it all. She lives a blessed life with husband, career, travel, and the American Dream. She wakes up one night in a panic, filled with anxiety about being 34 years of age, divorces her husband, becomes depressed and decides to spend a year in Italy, India, and Indonesia, to eat, pray, and find balance. She arrives in Italy determined to learn Italian and puts on 23 pounds by eating pasta. Off to India for a few months to learn to meditate, has a guru, and meets an

interesting cowboy from Texas with bumper sticker sayings. Then off to Indonesia to find balance where she falls in love with Felipe. The book was on the New York Times bestseller list for 150 weeks and the film got two thumbs down with critics calling it narcissistic to a modern day Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Many in our culture like Liz are seeking, hungering, and searching. The book and movie for me reflect a basic yearning for a life to have meaning, passion, and depth beyond the trappings. No, I wasn't impressed with either the movie or the book, but I understand the search reflected the lives of many, wondering and yearning for a blessed life. What did impress me was not so much the person on the journey in this book but the supporting characters in Italy who took her under their wings and showed her a sense of hospitality as a stranger, the cowboy from Texas who befriended her in India, and those in Indonesia who turned her from herself.

### **The Good News**

Yes, there is Good News in this story for those of you who are bright, competent, intelligent, and self-sufficient. Jesus is again stripping away at the veneer of life and knocking down the house of cards of our notion of how we seek to be blessed. Jesus turns the tables in our lives inviting us expand our understanding of hospitality, a Greek word meaning "loving the stranger", against recycling those with whom we feel a level of comfort. Hospitality toward the strangers and the strange is a doorway to the blessings of God. It opens our eyes and hearts to see the fabric and the tapestry of God in the world.

The Kingdom invades our lives, calling us out of the ghetto of our comfort zone to new life. Through you. If not you, then who? God calls the last, the least, and the lost. Your life is more, so much more than just your comfort zone, being secure, and free of anxiety. God will not be shaped into being a Deistic, Moralistic, and Therapeutic God who comes running when you call out his name, because he is a friend who wants you to be good so when you die you go to heaven.

Jesus revealed the secrets of the Kingdom in this Gospel for your life. Even for those who wonder what Good News can come from Jesus. The challenge is for us to be aware of our own hunger for blessings, and our drive to fill that hunger, even with the junk food. It doesn't have to be this way. You don't have to go to Italy, India, and Indonesia you can walk across the street, across the hall, to bless the stranger and the strange. The paradox is in the prayer of St. Francis, "in the giving we receive." When Jesus strips the veneer of our lives, he reveals it to be painful and sometimes humiliating, but it opens us to way of being, living, and loving by blessing and loving the stranger and the strange. This can be as threatening to our ears as it was to those who heard it from the mouth of our Lord. For others, it is an invitation to freedom, love, and to blessing. In Jesus we see the God who wants to be more than just a finger pointer of morality, a helping hand from Allstate, but a God who wants to be in relationship with you, and through you change the world for the stranger and the strange.