

The World is About to Turn

August 28, 2022

Flip the Script

This Gospel always brings to mind for me the planning of Scott's and my wedding. Scott, being an introvert, was all for a quiet, intimate affair, but I was a pastor in my 40s! I don't think there are numbers high enough to count the number of people who I:

- 1) wanted to celebrate with and
- 2) owed a meal and a beverage or three.

When his mom came to us with a list of 50 people she wanted to invite, Scott knew that a simple, quiet, intimate wedding was not in the cards. As all of the planning was going on, I would recount stories to my colleagues, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise to me when one of them tried to mess with me on the response card. On the little line where you're supposed to write in the number of guests who will be attending, he wrote 173!

When I called to laugh with him, he kept teasing that he was going to rent a bus and bring all of the residents of the Guest House, the UCC-founded homeless shelter in Milwaukee. Now, I tell you, friends, that even though it would have made for a much different day than I had imagined, I was kind of disappointed when the bus didn't pull up. NOT because I needed another 173 people to watch me walk down the aisle, not that we could have afforded that many more guests, but because the kind of dinner party that mixed professors and homeless men, TV personalities and the chronically poor, suburban republicans and the jobless, really was the party that we wanted, not just as payback for all of the many, many celebrations we had been invited to over the years.

In today's Gospel, Jesus continues on the theme we explored last week, in which Jesus healed the woman for her sake, and healed on the Sabbath for the sake of those around him. Last week, we looked at how the purpose of the law is not about personal protection, but rather the interplay of individual and communal liberation and flourishing. The way Jesus continues to weave this theme of both individual and communal flourishing into his teaching is through the parable we read today in which he tells us not to exalt ourselves, but rather to practice humility.

Humility

Humility! Now there's a lost and misunderstood virtue. Often, we think of humility as being modest, not too proud, not shining a light on one's accomplishments. Now, while Jesus speaks against exalting yourself, he isn't telling us to be falsely self-deprecating either. To mix scriptural metaphors, he's not telling us to put our light under a bushel basket. What he IS saying is this whole social game we play of exalting one over the other, having places of honor and privilege (and therefore places that aren't privileged) is contrary to a Godly way of life.

Remember in Philippians, we read that God humbled God's very being to become one of us, not out of some false modesty, but to model for us that hierarchy and exaltation, these things that we humans spend so much time on, are completely irrelevant in the divine domain, that collective flourishing is where God's heart is, not our individual accomplishments.

You know that term “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps?” We hear it a lot today to praise someone who is outwardly successful and who seems to have achieved this on their own. It’s often used to refer to a “self-made man,” someone who wasn’t born into wealth and is, the way they tell it, successful by their own doing.

But that phrase, “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps,” actually refers to an impossible task. The origin is thought to be a German fable in which a character pulls himself out of a swamp by pulling his own hair. The reality is, one gets out of the swamp by pulling or being pulled by something that is grounded, rooted, stable, and firm.

For the sake of our Gospel lesson today, that stable, grounded, firm thing that pulls us out of the swamp is God, is Jesus’ teachings and living his ways. But, just like the people of Jesus’ time, all too often, we imagine that we’ve accomplished things ourselves, that we as individuals are to be exalted.

Just listen to the brouhaha right now about student loan forgiveness. I actually saw a funny bit this week that read: “If you’re a Christian and you’re mad about student loan forgiveness, just remember, your religion is built upon a debt you couldn’t pay that someone stepped in and paid for you.”

Now, our church really doesn’t emphasize this theology, the idea that Jesus paid for our sins. Rather, we would look to today’s Gospel about not exalting oneself and this idea that it is truly impossible to pull oneself up by one’s own bootstraps, the idea that the purpose of the law is our mutual flourishing, to get to the same place.

Now, here’s the difference between a healthy degree of pride for one’s accomplishments and exalting oneself: Exalting oneself puts you above others, creates hierarchy and dominance. To go back to that image of pulling oneself out of a swamp, exalting oneself pushes off on someone else.

Contrast this with the Gospels, in which a central theme is that we have to get over this idea that we flourish at others’ expense. Healing on the Sabbath is Jesus saying, “Your rules and structures can’t stand at others’ expense.” The parable of the prodigal tells the stable, hardworking brother, “your righteousness cannot be given precedence over your brother’s wellbeing.” Remember, Jesus said, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, so that 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.”

Conclusion

Jesus tells us that the way we participate in his life, the way that he is actually going to be able to make a difference in our lives, is if we engage in some serious flipping of the script. Jesus is calling us to behave substantially differently than society tells us to, substantially differently than doing things because of power and prestige or because it benefits us personally. We do this

“Neither by seeking out the “places of honor” in order to be exalted now, nor by sitting at the “lowest place” in order to be exalted later.

Jesus mischievously bars both of these doors, and so sends us out on a different kind of journey with a different kind of spring in our step, a journey in which “being exalted” isn’t the goal at all. The goal, in a word, is love. But not just any love. Jesus envisions a love freed from all crass attempts at exaltation, at scoring points, at earning righteousness. A love for its own sake, without ulterior motive, without scheme or advantage, without quid quo pro. A truly generous love, a love that does not seek to be repaid.” (SALT Collective)

There is so much more to unpack in today’s Gospel, but we have a lot we need to do this morning so we’re going to need to wrap things up. Before we do, though, allow me to add a footnote to the story of our wedding celebration: As caterers tend to do, there was way too much food. There was enough to have fed the busload had my friend brought them.

And so, the day after the wedding, we did bring the wedding feast to the shelter, and had another feast. As the fellas helped us carry it all in from the car, set up the buffet, and marveled at the cake (which WAS amazing), I looked out at the smiles and the laughter and the joy, and thought, “I’m pretty sure this is what heaven looks like—somewhere with unlikely friends balancing heaping plates of food on their laps and an enormous chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting.”

Friends, once again, Jesus is mischievously encouraging us, gently cajoling us, to turn the tables, flip the script, re-examine our motivations. He’s drawing us out of our hierarchical economy of exaltation, and into a world rooted in grace, gift, blessing, and love. As we go forth this week, may those be our central motivations, too.

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