

“Re-Pay Day”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 28, 2016
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Holy Scriptures: Luke 14:1, 7-14 (NRSV)

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.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon

Jesus teaches on how to be a guest, saying:

¹¹ *“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Jesus teaches on how to be a host, saying:

¹³ *“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

Where did He learn such an attitude, a theology, a way of being?

Observations from house parties?

Years of study of the Hebrew scriptures?

Innate perceptivity because He was the Son of God?

Maybe He heard it when He was in the womb.

Don't look askance.

When our daughter Katie was born (22 years ago next week),
I took her then-3 year old brother Henry to meet her.
Early that morning we arrived at the hospital and walked to the maternity ward.
He approached her crib and was only inches from her face when he spoke.
She immediately turned her head toward him.
She knew his voice.
Of course!
When she was in Betty's womb,
she would have heard his voice for 9 months.
He was only that tall!
She definitely knew Betty's voice, and was attuned from the get-go.

So it is not farfetched to imagine Jesus knowing Mary's voice,
and to overhear her song of joy, her Magnificat,
that she sings when she learned she was to carry God's child,
a song she might have sung often
as an morning prayer of thanksgiving
and as a evening lullaby to a sleep
toddler.

Luke 1: 46b-55

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Jesus the baby, the toddler, the child, the teen, the young man
listens as Mary sings.

Jesus listens.

Jesus learns.

Her song sings of a God who is always the Host.

She sings of a loving Host who is always preparing and inviting.

She sings of an inviting Party Giver

who is always looking to see who else needs to be here.

Who is not represented?

Who is missing?

What can be done to bring him and her, us and them

all into the House, to the Table, into the Circle?

She sings of God who will not rest,

who is not yet satisfied and will never be satisfied

until all are made welcome.

Jesus comes to learn that God invites to the Table, to the banquet, to the feast

the lowly, the hungry, the outcast,

the widow, the orphan, the maimed, the disabled,

the troubled, the broke and the broken.

She sings of a God whose love is so all encompassing

the Lord sees as well who is closing doors and drawing down the shades.
So the haughty and proud, the callous and greedy
are sent away hungry,
sent off to their rooms to learn some manners before they return
and to discern how they themselves
might fill the hungry and the hurt with good
things.

Jesus learns that those who invite to their fancy parties
only folks who can re-pay the favor
have some re-thinking to do.

As He matures in age and his spirituality matures in depth,
Jesus reaches out and breaks bread
with tax collectors and sinners,
with Jews and Gentiles,
with the High Priests and those in the alleyways
and byways.

Jesus listens.

Jesus learns.

Jesus teaches that those who have neither property nor place in society
have a place at the Lord's Table.

Those in the synagogues and temples
are Kingdom people.

Those who follow God on the Way, rejoicing and giving thanks
are Kingdom people.

Those on the fringes
are Kingdom people, too, says Jesus.

Those who come to Jesus with faith and a heart of joy
are in the circle.

So, too, are those who prefer to think about God rather than believe;
so, too, are those whose hearts and minds wrestle
with more doubt and questions
than trust or answers.

Jesus looks upon those who speak the language of theology, who know their Bible,
and are comfortable with church-talk and congregational customs,
and He nods and acknowledges their presence with a kind look.

Jesus also welcomes in
those who have no idea what is going on
or have no clue as to whether they see themselves as a seeker or
searcher,
as a casual observer or critical spectator.

He listens to the flock assembled
and looks around to hear the voices on the fringe.

He learns the names of those who are present
and calls out the names of those who are absent.

He listens, and learns, and remembers.

Jesus remembers Mary's song, her Magnificat,
and He grows up to tell parables and stories, beatitudes and blessings
about a God of Grace and Glory.

The God Jesus knows appears to be One
who invites those in to dine
who cannot re-pay the favor,

who may or may not be fully cognizant
that we are in debt to a Wonderful, Mighty God
for such a love, a sacrifice, a redeeming
grace
that knows no boundaries,
limits or conditions.

Jesus listens.
Jesus learns.

This is the mark of humility.
This is what it means to be humble, to care, to be kind, to be gracious,
to look to other's needs before your own.

Jesus said, *"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*
In James 4: 10 we hear:
"Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, and God will lift you up."

When Jesus ponders and pontificates on the Great Banquet
we hope to dine at in the great bye and bye,
He teaches us that
¹³ *"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you,
for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*
You will be repaid.

You will have your Great Re-Pay Day.
Don't focus in on those who can repay you in the here and now.
Reach out to those who couldn't repay you in their lifetime,
because what really matters is their life,
and, if we hear Jesus correctly,
then maybe our life everlasting is impacted as
well.

Focus not on sending a meal to someone else (although this is also a good thing!);
focus on breaking bread together.

Disciples are a non-creedal people.
Each of us may believe and think as we choose, and all are welcome at the Table.
I choose to believe that if God's grace is true
then we will all be saved,
we will all be redeemed,
we will all be welcomed into God's Great Banquet.

The Good News is that our last breath on earth
is followed by our first breath in heaven.
I have a New Yorker cartoon that shows Heaven having two gates.
There are two long lines of people entering into heaven through the two gates.
Two gates, two lines, one Welcome Center.
Above one gate a sign says, "Right Religion."
Above the other gate it reads (you got it), "Wrong Religion."

I find this to be incredibly freeing and empowering.
God's love for all people empowers me to love all people,
to want to serve and care for and invite to the Table

each and every soul humanly (and divinely!) possible.
I find not worrying about who is in and who is out
to be extremely liberating;
relieved of worrying about heaven,
now I can focus on loving and living and serving and
giving,
trusting that God will decide and I am okay with
that.

Our culture put so much emphasis on religiosity and self-righteousness.
Let's put more emphasis on love.
Let's put more emphasis not about God but on God.
Let's put more emphasis on the nature and nurture of God,
which is to love:
Jesus, who listens and learns, calls us to love God, love your neighbor, love yourself.
Do this and you shall live!
Do this and you shall live forever!
Do this and we shall all live better lives, together, on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

As the late, great Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock once shared
when speaking about the Final Judgment
in this church's significant pulpit,
*"God grades on a curve.
The only question in the final exam is, 'How do you love your neighbor?'"*

A week ago Thursday
I was so excited to learn from my oncologist that I was still cancer free
(Yay God!) I went to Subway for a celebratory sandwich.
The woman at the cash register was wearing what looked like a Hijab.
So I offered her a Muslim greeting in Arabic, saying, *"As-salāmu alaykum!"*
She was startled and said, *"Pardon me?"*
So I said it again, and she said, *"As-sa what? What does that mean?"*
At which point I realized that she is most likely Hindu
and also most likely speaks no Arabic.
I was holding up the line and getting redder by the second.
You can say it was an Epic Fail, but it was an attempt, even if it fell short,
to respect and recognize people as they are.
And isn't this what we all want, to be respected and recognized?

Anne Lamott said, *"I think joy and sweetness and affection are a spiritual path.
We're here to know God,
to love and serve God,
and to be blown away by the beauty and miracle of nature.
You just have to get rid of so much baggage
to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play.
You don't have time to carry grudges;
you don't have time to cling to the need to be right."*
(Anne Lamott interview in The Washington Times)

Jesus is listening.
Jesus is learning about Atlanta.

Jesus is witnessing the goings on in Newton County.
Surely He saw the outpouring of meanness and fear,
the reactions to change and for having to deal with life in a global village,
as hundreds of Newton County citizens spoke up and against
a proposed Muslim place of worship and cemetery.

Jesus is also witnessing a local church in DeKalb County, our own melting pot of
people,
as a neighboring church humbled itself in the sight of the Lord.

Pastor Chris George at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, GA, said,
“What if Smoke Rise developed a reputation as a community of welcome?
What if here, in this church, we were known first and foremost as a good neighbor?”[\[1\]](#)

Chris George, pastor of the 1,800-member congregation since 2013,
had already written church members about Malik Waliyani,
whose gas station and convenience store a block away
was burglarized and ransacked earlier in the week.
“He’s a stranger to some of us,” George described the church’s neighbor in need.
“Although many of us have driven by his gas station every week
on our way to Smoke Rise [Baptist Church],
we might not know him.
Others may have stopped in, slid your card, but never walked inside.”
After learning about the crime committed in the wee hours of Monday, July 11,
George said he went over and introduced himself to Waliyani,
a practicing Muslim born in India
who had purchased the business just three months earlier.

So Chris George shared with the church:
“We are praying for him,” George said in the July 17 sermon.
“The kids are sending cards, but today we are making a decision to do more than that.
We’re putting our prayers into practice.
We are not going to be like those who walked to the other side of the street
when they see a stranger in need.
We are walking and we are driving to the other side of the street
to extend hospitality, care and compassion
because this is what Christians do.”
That afternoon an estimated 150 to 200 members
drove over to buy gas and make other purchases,
and over the next week continued to shop,
with an estimated 350 or more churchgoers stopping by in
all.

The story went national on August 13, 2016
when New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof
mentioned the church’s act of kindness.
“Good people, like the members of Smoke Rise Baptist,
are reweaving our nation’s social fabric even as it is being torn,”
Kristof said in the column contrasting the act
with meanness and polarization characterizing current political debate.

George said that Smoke Rise has received cards, calls and other communication
from people of all faiths all over the world and is also seeing the beginning

of new relationships and partnerships in the community.
“We have been surprised by the ripple effects
of what seems like a small pebble of kindness tossed into the water,”
“A simple act of compassion has been a source of hope and inspiration for others.”
“Scripture tells us God takes a small thing, like a mustard seed, and works miracles,”
he said. “This has certainly been our experience, and we give thanks to God.”

When God hears voices speak like this,
and sees people act like this,
God’s head turns and looks with joy!

Proof positive that we, too, can listen...and learn...and remember...and rejoice.

All power be to the Creator, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] <https://baptistnews.com/article/good-samaritan-act-has-ripple-effect-for-cbf-church/>