

Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2016 – “Real Life Lessons; Holy Meaning”

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 28, 2016

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Amalia Vagts, Preacher; Pr. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson, Presiding

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

“Real Life Lessons; Holy Meaning”

It's been a hard week in our town and in this congregation.

I've told Pastor Amy that there are some days when I wish I could come to church, but just lie down in one of the pews for the whole service.

Maybe you feel like that this morning.

Too often when we come to church, we feel like we have to put on a front so that people don't know how messed up our lives really are.

Some in our congregation woke up on Wednesday morning to their home surrounded by water or coming down around them. The rivers and creeks cut off parts of the town from the other – pulled down trees, destroyed crops and gardens, homes, and recreational areas.

Pastor Marion and I are up here today because our dear Pastor Amy lost her beloved friend Sarah unexpectedly this week. This was the family Pastor Amy preached about a few weeks back – remember, the “moms” and the “dads” story? Pastor Amy spent the last few days with Sarah's family and the people of Our Savior's Lutheran in Faribault, where Sarah was lead pastor, as they grieved this sudden and painful loss and prepared for her funeral service tomorrow, which Pastor Amy will help lead. Pastor Amy, Matt, Nathan, and Abby are in deep mourning and will need our care.

Others in our town are grieving the death of Ryk Trytten – young and lost to cancer after only a year of illness.

Tanya, Faust and Eli have been packing up their home and preparing to move – there is joy in the journey, but sadness too.

You may be experiencing a loss or pain that others of us here don't even know about. Yours might feel too big to talk about –

Or too small. Our week started with the loss of our chickens to a raccoon. Most weeks, I would have talked about it – and about the way our friends pitched in to help us out. This week, I kept it to myself for the most part because it felt so small.

And, yet somehow, we are all here this morning. We came to be together. We came to receive or give something this morning through worship together. And our readings today are all about giving and receiving. They offer real life advice with holy meaning.

In the second parable in Luke, Jesus instructs hosts to throw dinners for those who cannot repay.

Don't invite your friends, family, and rich neighbors, Jesus says. They'll just have you over the next week and repay you. Instead, host those who cannot repay you, because then you will be blessed and among the righteous at the resurrection.

This week, with flood recovery, I experienced more of us offering help than asking for it. It's easiest, I think, to see ourselves as the host throwing a party for those who cannot repay us. **It's much hard to imagine being the person without power who needs help.**

Think of a time when you have been helped by someone – did you accept their help without feeling the need to somehow repay them?

As we listen to this reading, we think – oh, what unfortunate person could I help, who couldn't repay me, and thereby guarantee that I will be blessed and among the righteous?

But do you remember the lesson from Proverbs and the first parable in today's Gospel? In that one, Jesus teaches us to not take the seat of honor, in case you get moved down the table for someone who is more important than you.

I think these two parables are more linked than they appear to be on the surface.

I mentioned earlier that we lost our chickens this week. Our dear friends Mark and Kristen found them while we were out of town. They took care of everything. They consoled us. They made dinner for us when we arrived home. They stayed to dig the hole and bury the animals in our backyard.

For dinner that night, I insisted on pulling out the best wine we had in our house. "Just give us the cheap stuff!" Mark insisted, but I could not bear accepting all they had given without showing my gratitude.

In a sense, I was putting myself up at the front seat of honor – making a display of my generosity and in essence, trying to overshadow all they had done.

This is a connection between these two parables. There are times when all of us truly need help, when we need to be humble. Sometimes our friends and family will provide it. Sometimes strangers will. Sometimes what we need will require God's help. Imagine admitting you are powerless, you are in need, you are empty and accepting the hand that reaches out to assist you. Accept this grace. These are real life lessons – with holy meaning.

There is another lesson in this first parable too. Think for a moment about a time when you stepped into a place of honor that wasn't yours.

I was talking with a friend the other day about this parable. When I asked him if he could think of a time like this, he said, oh, yes, immediately.

He told me about being a boy and going to his first middle school baseball practice. His older brother was a star on the varsity team, and so for the first day he took one of his brother's uniforms and wore it to practice. He imagined how cool he would appear to his peers when they saw that he was closely connected with older, more experienced players.

At the very beginning of practice, as he stood feeling proud and powerful in his shirt, the coach called his name across the field. He told the boy he was wearing a uniform that he hadn't earned, and to take it off. The boy had gone from feeling cool and powerful, to feeling ashamed.

It was that feeling of shame that got me wondering about the effects of public embarrassment. In my own life, I've described this to friends as that "hot shower of shame" when I recall moments in my own life when I've presumed to be better than I am or someone who I'm not.

The memories of moments like these – many which do come from our younger years – remain present in our lives.

I don't think that the lesson we should take away from this is to become completely subservient people, always taking the worst seat – **or the last pew!**, the smallest serving, and the one piece of cake that has no decoration on it.

Anyone who grew up Lutheran does not need that lesson.

I think the lesson is that God asks us to embrace who we are. We don't have to pretend to be more than we are. We can leave space for our host – God to recognize and us our true selves.

The way we live our lives each day connects to the holy and renewing life we are promised by God through Jesus. Through accepting help, we bless others and experience grace. By admitting it when we are low, we have the opportunity to be lifted up. By keeping our lives free from the love of money, we are open to receive

God's gifts. Through offering hospitality to a stranger, we encounter the holy. Real life lessons; holy meaning.

This week, let someone help you. Do not repay them. Be open to the possibility that you are a person in need. In this, you open yourself up to the love, peace, and grace that only God can give.

Amen.