

Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2016

A New Economy

In the ancient world there was an understanding—that when you invited someone over for dinner or to be a guest at a banquet, they would be in your debt and need to repay you—whether with an invitation to a dinner *they* were hosting or with a favor...

It was a quid pro quo relationship—I do something for you, you do something for me in return. This means that hosts and guests were typically in the same socio economic bracket and they had similar political, social or religious clout...

As Jesus walked into dinner at the Pharisees house, he saw this economy at work...and decided to tell a parable.

Now—when I think of parables I think of farmers sowing seeds, the good Samaritan, the shepherd who found the lost sheep or the prodigal son. This story, however, is not so memorable and doesn't immediately spring to mind....

But Jesus was a master story teller—he used common items like mustard seeds, wine and bread, and everyday situations, like banquets, to point to deep theological truths—in order to reveal who God is and God's kingdom. These stories are also meant to provide a new lens for us to look through and see the world in a new way.

So Jesus tells this story-

“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. 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.”

I have no doubt that when Jesus said this, the host and the guests looked at him like he had 5 heads. This advice to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—goes against all social traditions. Not only would this group of people be unable to repay the debt, but some in the group listed were also considered religiously impure—to invite them into their homes went against social norms as well as religious laws.

But Jesus was up to something—in verse 13 he says “When you give a banquet...” this is a slight nod to something else...on the first Sunday of every month we celebrate the Lord's Supper—an event that reminds us of what God has done and points us to the day when we will all sit around the table in God's kingdom at the heavenly banquet—where Christ is the host.

As Jesus stands in the home of the Pharisee, he sees the quid pro quo system of “I do something for you and you do something for me”—and he calls it out—because while it may work well for some— it does not work well in real relationships—especially when it comes to God.

In order to repay someone you have to assign a price—but what is forgiveness worth? What's the market value for mercy? Or for grace?

This parable reminds us that God doesn't operate in a quid pro quo world—Our invitation to the table isn't contingent on how much food we've given to the food bank, or how big of a check we can write, and it's not because we showed up for habitat or went on the Urban Plunge.

We are welcomed into the household of faith, not because we've earned it or have lived the perfect life, it's not because of our social standing or because we can do really big favors for God... We're graciously given a seat at the table-no strings attached.

So, for you, when you're all alone, when you're making decisions, or when you've made a mistake, which economy does the God who camps out on your shoulder live in? Do you find yourself needing to earn your way back into God's good graces? Or somehow make a mends for something you've done? Do you find yourself saying "this time will be different". If so, it might be time to listen again.

Because I hope you hear the good news, that God welcomes all of who you are—whether you're feeling all put together or pretty broken, whether your grades are off to a good start or you can already tell this academic year's gonna be a struggle, whether your business has never been better or you can't remember a time it's been worse—I hope you hear that God is inviting you—grace cannot be earned—we receive more than we could ever repay—but the point isn't repayment—it's to live life abundantly.

To let go of what others think or expect and live in the truth that you are a beloved child of God.

And a piece of living life abundantly is turning around and inviting others—not just the people we know, or who think, act or look like us, not just those who live a similar life style to our own, but people we consider to be strangers.

Our first New Testament reading was from Hebrew's 13, and begins like this: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Now, I know the word stranger has all kinds of bad connotations, and being a child of the 80's there's a deeply ingrained "stranger danger" instinct. But I think we let that word trip us up...

Strangers are simply people we don't know--Maybe people who are new to the neighborhood or who just started attending church? Or those really weird people who didn't grow up in St. Louis and have no idea why everyone keeps asking them where they went to high school...

A stranger can be the new student at your school who really needs someone to sit with during lunch, or the new parent at your kids school who could use a friend.

Dear friends, we are invited to the table with no strings attached, but what strings are attached to your love?

We're used to an economy that is transactional-I do something for you, you do something for me-an economy that attempts to put a price on everything-but that is not how the kingdom of God works...we cannot put a price on love, mercy, grace and forgiveness-

You are invited to the table with no strings attached-so the question is, who would you like to invite to come join you?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Rev. Melanie A. Smith
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
St. Louis, MO 63124
August 28, 2016