

September 1, 2019 | Summer worship service

TEXT: [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

TITLE: Beyond Categories

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Where does this phrase come from: “On earth as it is in heaven”? It’s the fourth phrase in the Lord’s Prayer. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Those words capture the dual nature of faith—we live now as we hope to live then; we live here as we hope to live in God’s realm when this life is completed. Everything Jesus taught had this double focus to it, including the fascinating episode I just read from Luke’s gospel.

Jesus was making his way toward Jerusalem, toward the events that would mark the end of his earthly life. On the way, he was a Sabbath guest in a Pharisee’s house. Because this was an important day in an important man’s house, there was a certain amount of prestige associated with being invited to this meal—coupled with curiosity in having a guest, this wandering rabbi from Nazareth, at the meal with them. Jesus noticed people’s behavior—how they jockeyed for places of honor—and so he told them a mini-parable. *When you attend a wedding banquet, don’t rush for the best places at the meal, but humbly start at the low places, trusting that the host will move you up to a place of honor.*

Notice Jesus made reference to “wedding banquets.” Wedding banquets were both real events in the here and now and were symbols referring to God’s heavenly kingdom yet to come. Jesus was stressing that how you act now is connected to how you will live then. That is why it is important to be wise, be faithful, and be humble.

Once Jesus got everyone’s attention, he went on to recommend which folks we should invite to share our meals. He said, *When you give a luncheon, don’t invite people who can pay you back, but instead invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.* Now, you can be a literalist and do a type of Charity Bingo in which you try to find someone in each of those categories to invite to a meal, thereby obeying what Jesus asks of you. But Jesus is hoping for something more than superficial acts of one-time charity. Sure, there’s value in serving a meal to the homeless or giving some cash to the person panhandling downtown. But to live on earth as we’ll live in heaven means that we should share our meals and our time with people with whom we’ll talk, connect, listen and care about—whatever their category in life. So if you put forth the extra effort and invite people different from you and connect with them in a genuine way, they become something more than a poor, deaf or lame person. In such acts of caring hospitality, you are richly blessed—which is precisely why Jesus told these parables in the first place.

Back in 1882, a nine-year old Virginia girl moved with her family to a farm outside of Red Cloud, Nebraska—population 1,000. They were homesteaders, trying to carve out a new life on the prairie frontier. A year or two later, this young girl took on the task of delivering mail by horseback out to the immigrant families who’d settled in the wind-

swept, tall grass, flatland surrounding Red Cloud. Many of them didn't speak much English. So for them, letters from the Old Country invariably contained momentous news—news of births, news of deaths. After handing over the battered envelope, the girl would wait as trembling hands read the letter and often as tears followed whatever news was written on the wrinkled pages. Seeing these moments of real life – being the one who helped share the news or being the first to say “I'm sorry” to a hurting family - stayed with this young girl. It gave her stories to write about. Her name was Willa Cather. She graduated from the University of Nebraska and lived for many years in Squirrel Hill here in Pittsburgh before moving to New York. Her novels, such as *O Pioneer!* and *The Song of the Lark* built on what she learned delivering mail and compassionately connecting with the poor and immigrant families outside Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Jesus mentioned the poor, crippled, lame and blind not as narrow categories for our acts of mercy; rather he wanted us to recognize that kindness means making accommodations so everyone feels welcome. Here are a few examples of these accommodations. 1) How many of you have played the game UNO? It's a game in which you match numbers or colors to get rid of your cards. But what if you're color-blind and can't tell red from green? Someone figured out how to add small shapes to the cards so color-blind people can play this simple game. 2) What if you've got a significant hand tremor and you have to sign your name on a document? A bracelet has been designed that sends out small pulses that distract the nerves in your hand enough to let you write slowly and legibly again. 3) What if you're deaf and you want to attend a symphony concert? A German firm has created sweaters that translate the different instruments in the orchestra into pulses felt on your arms and upper body so a deaf person can feel what others can hear. These types of inventions move people beyond categories of disability into people brought back into the fullness of human society. By this everyone is blessed by this type of gracious accommodation.

But let's continue this line of thought by moving beyond the physical into the emotional. I just finished a book of essays called Into Sanity. These short works were powerful firsthand descriptions of what it is like to care for someone with mental illness, or to be someone with bipolar, suicidal, or self-harm tendencies. One essay was built around the refrain “You can try ending this way” as it talked in detail about overdoses, cutting, anorexia, or violent deaths. Some essays reflected on loved-ones who'd died from addiction. Others described dehumanizing visits to jail - the waiting, the phone receiver connecting you to someone you love on the opposite side of a thick glass. For a moment, think about the people in your life—in your family or circle of acquaintances. If you're willing, raise your hand if you know someone battling with mental illness or addiction. Raise your hand if you know someone in prison or in the criminal justice system. We could keep going—listing off those who've experienced racism, sexual abuse, or struggled with alcoholism. The church must always be a place where we can name these issues with openness and compassion.

Jesus said, *when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind and you will be blessed.* But even as he names those categories, Jesus' hope is

that we'll go beyond such categories. That we'll populate our guest list with all types of people—people who know what it is like to be admitted to or visit someone at Western Psych, those who have spent sleepless nights worrying about a child or parent, those who replay events over and over wondering how some tragedy might have been avoided. Jesus hopes we'll see the humanity in all people—whatever label has been assigned them by secular society, a society too often prone to false categories of honor, of pushing for places of prestige at banquets. Jesus hopes we will upend these flawed categories and see one another for who we all are: invariably wounded, incredibly brave, inherently loved, and eternally valued children of God.

Part of the way we do this happens right here. Church congregations can be maddening, imperfect, bureaucratic and aggravating at times (at least in other places; never here!), but there are two special things that happen at church that don't happen in the world outside these walls. Last week we celebrated a baptism. A little girl named Emery was brought forward by a family very few of us knew well. The family's background or wealth, status, race, or zip code didn't matter in the slightest. For a few minutes on a Sunday morning, a small family was surrounded by a larger family. A child—a symbol of hope and life—was linked to the name of Jesus Christ, sprinkled, washed with water, surrounded with prayer and smiles and love. When else—where else—does that happen outside these walls? When else—where else—do categories that divide fall away so easily and for a moment things are on earth as they are in heaven?

And today we will share communion. It is a ritual, dating back to Moses and the Jewish Passover meals, remembering what it feels like to be in slavery and then to be free. It dates back to Jesus, an intimate meal shared with a group of struggling disciples—fishermen, tax collectors, activists, seekers. Women and men were in that room. Bread was broken and shared equally, lovingly, as personally as possible—with Jesus literally saying, *This is my body broken, given, shared with you for you*. Categories fell away. On earth as it is in heaven.

This is why we invite friends and strangers to join us for worship. This is hopefully a place where categories don't matter. This is where we become part of something bigger—something that looks deep and knows we are all in some way wounded; that looks wide and knows we are in many ways interconnected; that looks far and knows the only way to reach the horizon is to act now on earth as if we are in heaven. Jesus said, *invite the poor, crippled, lame, blind*—you fill in the blank—then look beyond life's categories—see the baptism water on one another's heads as we share Christ's meal—*and yes, you will be blessed*. Welcome to a table here on earth as it is in heaven.

Thanks be to God.