### “They Cannot Repay You” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 4, 2022

**Luke 14:1, 7–14**

1On 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. . .

7 When 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.”

12 He 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.”

The two halves of the reading have different, but related messages.

The first half has the message of humility. Don’t grab for status, but stay in the lower position, and maybe the host will invite you up higher. Don’t be promoting yourself; people will notice your merits. Let your merits speak for themselves. Don’t walk around thinking you’re entitled.

What about this admonition to wait until one is called up to a higher position? Karen told me a story that relates to this. One of her friends was the mother of a boy who really wanted to play on the soccer team. The boy tried out, and he made the team. But when the season started, he found himself playing a position where he didn’t see much action. He complained to his mom about wanting to be put in a more active position. She told him, “don’t worry; just keep doing what you’re doing. They’ll notice you and they’ll move you up.” Sure enough, after a few games, the boy was moved to a more important position and saw more ball action. He had done his job, his play was noticed, and he was moved to a higher position.

The second admonition in the gospel reading is more about social systems and the values they try to impose on us. It is really a direct attack on the selfish patronage system, where you do favors so that you might get favors in return. In the patronage system, every good deed is calculated to get a return. A good deed is like a payment for which you expect to be repaid. If you give a banquet, it is because you are trying to boost your popularity and get other people to owe you. But Jesus wants us to do good things for people who cannot possibly repay us.

He is saying: be aware of the payback system and don’t buy into it. In fact, don’t let your values be shaped by the selfishness of others. When you do a good deed, don’t be calculating the personal benefit to yourself. Do your good deeds without expectation of reward—except for reward in the next life. You can go ahead and figure that that will happen. So you are allowed to think of *spiritual* self-benefit, but just not of dollars and cents or of prestige and power in this lifetime. But it’s best to not even think about reward at all; just be in the moment. Do you see a person in need that you can help? Then step right up! You can also hope for spiritual reward or benefit in the next life, just don’t plan your actions based on expectations. Be spirit-led in the present moment. This is such a different motivation from a selfish one. It’s non-materialistic, and that’s the point. Your acts of kindness bring heaven to earth.

But I also think this forces us to redefine “selfishness.” Doing what is right spiritually, even though it may benefit us personally, is not to be defined as selfish. When you do things that will reap a reward for you in the next life, this involves affirming truth and goodness, which is good for everybody.

Your unselfish spiritual service will end up benefitting you spiritually, and that’s as God desires. Spirit is different from matter in that you can get more of it by giving it away, and without taking any away from anybody else. If fact, the more you share it, the more you have of it. From the material point of view, spirit is paradoxical and incomprehensible. It doesn’t have the same material constraints and limits that material things do. In this way, the poor and the lame can bring more long-lasting reward than can the rich and powerful.

Jesus is always trying to train his apostles in the spiritual way, which means learning a whole new way of thinking, retraining the mind to think very differently about everything, especially in the realm of human relations. We have to learn to honor the poor, respect the crippled, do good to the foreigner.

We should all have the image in our heads of Jesus as the teacher and we as pupils who have to learn many new things. We should understand that we are always needing to be taught to rethink our approach to others, and maybe our approach to life, too. Being a Christian should mean being part of a process of constant rethinking. A Christian should be always growing, never static. Jesus wanted his disciples to develop new habits of behavior. It probably went against their habitual practice when he said “when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place” (Luke 14:10).

And it certainly went against common practice to invite the poor, the lame, and the blind to one’s banquets. People tend to invite people of their own social class to banquets, but he wants us to invite people considered to be of lower social class.

The religious fellowship should not have the same class boundaries that society has. Churches have often neglected these instructions, and have unconsciously maintained class barriers within the church. Undoubtedly, it is usually unconsciously done, when we maintain class and racial barriers. But we need to become more conscious. Part of becoming a good pupil is becoming more aware.

Several of Jesus’ parables seem to be designed to make believers more conscious, more thoughtful, more aware, for instance, that a foreigner like a Good Samaritan can be godly (Luke 10:25–37), more aware that a poor widow might be more generous and giving than a rich Pharisee (Mark 12:42–44).

When I was a student in England, I had no family or close friends in the country. But I was loyally attending a Baptist church while I was there, and in December of my first year there, Pastor John came to me and said, “do you have plans for Christmas?” I said, “not really.” He said, “would you like to come and spend it with my family?” I gratefully accepted, and they accepted me as one of their own. Apparently it was a tradition in his family to take a walk at dusk on Christmas, so I joined them as we walked and surveyed the surrounding farms and woods. Then I joined them for dinner. It was such an unexpected kindness, and one that I could not really repay. And he invited me again the next year. I was a foreigner in his country, but he accepted me. I know it made me feel welcomed, and I think it made them feel good, too. Because such deeds do warm one’s own heart. They spread goodness out like ripples in a pond.

So let us be like a generous banquet-holder. Let us be like an attentive Good Samaritan. Let us be open to the other, even if he or she is poor or looks different than us. In the Kingdom of God, outward looks and status are unimportant. Let the Spirit within you be shared outwardly. Bring God’s goodness to earth.