

Sermon TUMC - November 8, 2020 - Peace Sunday 2

**What is being revealed? Who is at the table?**

*Holy Spirit, open our hearts to hear the words we most need to hear.  
Challenge us in our discipleship  
And empower us to be peacemakers in your name. Amen.*

Luke 14: 1-23

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At TUMC we usually choose the Sunday nearest Remembrance Day to mark as Peace Sunday. This year, we decided to have two Peace Sundays. Last week Cedric told us about conscientious objectors and some considerations around what we normally think of about peace in relationship to war.

You may be wondering why I picked this bible passage in Luke for Peace Sunday.

Well, I chose it before any of the US election results were official, because, even though those politics have been a source of great despair for many of us in the last 4 years, and even though there are some great signs of hope in the results which came out yesterday, that is not the ultimate source of our hope as people of peace. Don't forget, those are the politics of nations that have fuelled the military industrial complex and it's destructive narratives, regardless of who has been in charge. They still lift up the mighty and send the lowly to prison or kill them on the streets where they cannot breathe.

I don't want to be a downer, I have let out a sigh of relief just like all the rest of you. But I'm here to remind us that our source hope for peace lies in the values of God's kin-dom. We do see some of those values in the political promises, in the change of tide. But our source of hope for peace

lies in the seeking of shalom — the wellbeing of all God’s creation — and in the upside-down ways that Jesus teaches us to follow. Jesus, who washed feet and lifted up the lowly, and turned literal and figurative tables.

And so our text for today is about peace because it is about questioning the systems that we are a part of.

This week, I’d like to take us in a slightly different direction from last week and ask us some hard questions. My desire is to challenge us all in this church community (myself included) to **be peacemakers in social and cultural ways; to acknowledge our power, and to use it to further God’s peaceful kin-dom.**

In the gospel of Luke, there is a lot of “table talk,” many scenes that happen around meals. (This was the title of a recent Mennonite Church Canada study conference and I’m drawing on some of that here. You can find an excellent bible study on the second part of our reading here).<sup>1</sup>

This reminded me of a meal that I had. A few years back I went to visit the Taizé Community in a small village in Burgundy, France. They are a monastic community that attracts young people from around the world with their unique approach to worship and community. Because it was France, I went secretly expecting amazing food. Nothing could have been farther from reality! (Talk about the exalted being humbled!)

At that first meal, some sort of gray-ish lentils intermingled with what seemed to be spam was glopped on to my plastic dish. As I sat there trying to eat with a spoon — the only utensil that was provided — I just couldn’t handle it. I forced down a few bites then I went to dump the rest of the unappetizing stew in the trash. As I was doing so, one of the veterans of the place came quietly over to me and said something really nice along the lines of “We don’t waste food.”

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<sup>1</sup> To watch a Bible Study by Sheila Klassen-Wiebe see <https://youtu.be/GuEIROX8lj0>

And thus the unwritten rule that everyone knew but me, was enforced. I was shamed and I conformed. From then on I would only accept a glob of nourishment that I felt I was capable of consuming in its entirety. (I have to say it was not a bad rule, just bad food).

It's interesting how rules and customs work, isn't it? How quickly communities settle on "the way we do things around here." The lines of insiders and outsiders are drawn swiftly and almost without anyone noticing. And unspoken rules remain in place, quietly communicating the right way and the wrong way of doing things, who has influence and who doesn't.

We don't know the menu at the Sabbath meal that the writer of Luke is telling us about (Though it could have easily been lentils, I think it's probably a safe bet that it wasn't Spam) but we do know something about the power dynamics that were at play at that meal. Let's have a look.

As we work through this story, hold on to these questions: what is similar to how things are in our context? Who has power and who does not have power? How do they use it? How does this scripture hold up a mirror to our own ways of doing things? Who do you identify with in the story?

First of all, the folks Jesus was with were all Pharisees. Jesus seems to hang out quite a bit with Pharisees in the gospels. They are his dialogue partners in many of the stories we read.

These were men in first century Judaism who put a lot of stock in following rules. Rules about what one could and couldn't eat, what was considered ritually pure or impure and what one could or couldn't do on the Sabbath — that special time once a week that was to be set aside for God alone and not for work. Much of their time was spent discussing these rules and arguing their finer points.

Readers of the gospels have often been hard on the Pharisees as a group. But I think that is a bit unfair. They lived this way because they wanted to please God. Some did it better than others. They thought God wanted this from them and they wanted to get it right. They are well-intentioned people who are set in their ways.

Our passage starts out right away with Jesus engaging them at their own pastime - discussing rules.-

Jesus and the Pharisees are on the way to a special meal on the Sabbath and they meet up with someone who has a condition that is not a medical emergency, more likely a chronic swelling. Jesus asks them what they think, “should he heal or not heal?” because technically you weren’t supposed to “work” on a Sabbath.

Jesus kept pushing them on their rules all through the gospels, he kept healing on a Sabbath and then challenging the rule-followers to question his compassion. That is what is going on in this scene, Jesus, as always, is getting behind and beyond the way things are always done. Keepin’ it real.

As it happens, in the literary world of the gospel Luke, a character with swelling (or “dropsy” as the KJV calls it) represents gluttony, consuming passions, and greed.<sup>2</sup> So it is interesting that the story starts with him. Whether this was a real person or a convenient narrative device, either way, Jesus is trying to heal something here and it is the single-minded greedy focus on “the right way of doing things” and on their own social and standing.

And so as the narrative moves on. It is fascinating that here in Luke 14 we have a meal where Jesus talks about meals. In the Jewish religious imagination at the time, and by extension in ours today, the image of a

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<sup>2</sup> Louise Anne Gosbell, PhD Thesis, “The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame”: Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament, 2005 <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f083/93d6047624c0095e218eea2832ca281401c1.pdf>

banquet is used to picture that perfect future where God has made everything right in the world. There's an image in Isaiah that talks about this great banquet that we imagine as a vision of peace.

That seems to be what the Pharisee who offers the toast thinks is going on at any rate, with his macarism. (Side track: Yes, if you're still paying attention that's the new word I learned while researching this sermon. My contribution to our vocabulary. Macarism means the ascription of happiness to a person. Calling them blessed.)

That may be the case that this is all a metaphor and it is certainly one way of reading it. But if we only look at this as a symbol, we lose a lot of what Jesus was trying to say on this occasion. So Jesus tells two stories in order to emphasize his point: One about how to seek humility and another about how to include the humble.

The society that Jesus lived in was guided by honour and shame, they were very important, in ways that were way more clear and overt than they are in our culture. When it came to meals somebody's status in the community was determined and honoured by where they were placed around the table. (Remember all the conversations the disciples had about who would be at Jesus' right and at his left? That's the kind of concern that is at play.)

Meals together were social occasions that marked boundaries and established hierarchies. Who is more important? People ate with their own social class and where they were seated solidified status differences very clearly. People of different classes would not eat together. (Klassen-Wiebe)

Scholars tell us that part of the honour-shame social norms, meant that you only invited people to dinner who could invite you back. Not being able to reciprocate, dishonoured the host. (Though I'm left wondering how Jesus reciprocated and what social class he was considered to be.)

So you see, in some ways, important people looking for important spots, and hospitality being reciprocated, things were really not so different in the ancient world than they are in our day.

As is his custom, Jesus challenges power systems. Here Jesus is challenging the Pharisees, the men who had power and prestige — and good intentions — to have a good hard look at themselves and see the unspoken games they were playing by vying for the best spots, the positions that would show how important they were and keep their status.

Now, because I like to imagine Jesus with a sense of humour, I think he might be using a bit of a teasing tone when he gives them this strategy of what seat to pick. Maybe there had been two people awkwardly standing around one of the good seats and he was trying to break the tension.

He is also calling them out on not wanting to owe anything to anyone. Jesus is inviting them to stop playing by those rules and to turn things upside down, to stop having exclusive events, to include everyone. “Don’t just invite your friends, expand your circles.”

As I apply it today, for me it isn’t about meals per se, but about who gets to have a voice at the table and who gets to set priorities in our community.

In the first part of the story Jesus is inviting people of privilege to stop trying to decide who is more important. He’s offering a strategy for peacemaking: **Choose to divest yourself of power and privilege, choose humility and let things shake out accordingly. Opt out of the tit for tat games with your peers and include people who are not like you.**

Jesus encourages them to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, and then gives them a second story to demonstrate his point.

I need to say a word about what list “poor, crippled, blind and lame” and what it might mean in this text. To us they sound ableist, words used by those who have certain types of bodies while describing people with different physical or sensory capacities as inferior. That would be the case if they are being used as a metaphor, but these are not metaphorical words when Jesus is using them.

In this case, these descriptions probably mean exactly that, people with no financial means and with physical differences. These are literally the people who would never have been invited to meals in the ancient world, except maybe as entertainers.<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees might have considered them ritually impure and not wanted to associate with them. They were the outcasts and the marginalized at the time of Jesus. And unfortunately, they are often people of less status in our society today as well.

Here’s the thing, the marginalized in society are the very people that Jesus uses to define his ministry in Luke 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

**In our efforts at being peacemakers, do we include people who fit these categories? Do we go out of our way to seek the marginalized and let them be who they are without having to conform to our unspoken rules?**

There is another dynamic going on as well, in this second part of our text. It’s curious that the author of Luke does not call this a parable, so it may well have been a true story that Jesus was retelling. It works either way.

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<sup>3</sup> Gosbell

A host goes to a lot of work to prepare a banquet and is shunned by his invitees. They make up a bunch of fake excuses why they can't come at the last minute. It's almost like it's a coordinated effort to ignore him or to humiliate her, or maybe it's just plain old indifference. They couldn't care less about the host's efforts, they don't realize how important it was to this host, and they reject the host's hospitality.

Why did they do that? Let's imagine for a moment that he or she was a foreigner, or a person from a different culture, or a tax collector, or a soldier, or someone who voted for Trump? How does that change the story? How does it change who you identify with in the story?

Have you ever ignored or downplayed the efforts of someone who was different or who you thought "less" than you?

When we do this kind of thing, we are not living by the values of the peaceable kingdom.

So why did I choose this as a text for Peace Sunday?

Because I think sometimes it's easier to think about peacemaking only as relating to systems we don't take part in — out there somewhere in the world, or in the government. We can ignore that the cultural and social norms that we live by day to day can also cause violence to others, the violence of exclusion, the violence of transactional relationships (relationships where you only give something when you can get something in return), the violence of thinking everyone is equal when they are not. For example by responding "all lives matter" to people of colour, or "everyone is welcome" to LGBTQ people who have been seriously harmed and excluded by church doctrine and structures. We need to attend to how we include people and to whose voices we elevate and whose voices we silence.



In Luke 14 Jesus invites us to churn up our assumptions, to forego status, to use our power to include the people who are never included, to elevate the voices of those with no voice, and to choose humbleness over honour.

These are also the things that make for peace. May God help us to live in this way.