

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

**Sunday closest to August 31**

Proper 17

Year C RCL



Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

#### The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen.

### Psalm 112

#### *Beatus vir*

1 Hallelujah!

Happy are they who fear the Lord \*  
and have great delight in his commandments!

2 Their descendants will be mighty in the land; \*  
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

3 Wealth and riches will be in their house, \*  
and their righteousness will last for ever.

4 Light shines in the darkness for the upright; \*  
the righteous are merciful and full of compassion.

5 It is good for them to be generous in lending \*  
and to manage their affairs with justice.

6 For they will never be shaken; \*  
the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance.

7 They will not be afraid of any evil rumors; \*  
their heart is right;  
they put their trust in the Lord.

8 Their heart is established and will not shrink, \*  
until they see their desire upon their enemies.

9 They have given freely to the poor, \*  
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;  
they will hold up their head with honor.

10 The wicked will see it and be angry;  
they will gnash their teeth and pine away; \*  
the desires of the wicked will perish.

### Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;  
I will not be afraid.  
What can anyone do to me?”

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

### **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

On 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.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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; and 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. But 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

## SERMON

I have a question for you. If I'm a stinker, and God loves me anyway, is there any reason for me to stop stinking? To put it more formally, if I'm a sinner and God loves me anyway, do I have any responsibility to react to God's free gift of love? I'd like for you to spend some time thinking about that this week. It's an important question. If we needn't earn our way into God's love by our actions because He loves us anyway, what is the point of doing any good deeds? What's in it for me if the impulse of love comes first from God, no matter what I do? I'm not kidding here. We're wading into very deep theological waters.

No less than Martin Luther painted himself into this corner in 1521.

**It is sufficient that we recognize through the wealth of God's glory the lamb who bears the sins of the world; from this sin does not sever us, even if thousands, thousands of times in one day we should fornicate or murder.**

In Luther's view in that letter it's all about God. It is only important that we recognize the lamb who bears the sins of the world. What we do matters very little. In this view, if we are stinkers, God loves us anyway, and there is no reason to stop stinking because it's not about us. It's all about God and once saved, always saved.

That's not the Eastern Kentucky view, of course. Around here, the more common understanding is, "Do the best you can and God will forgive the rest. That's how you get into heaven and that's what it's all about." Luther thinks it's all about God, and he loves us no matter how we stink. We focus on how to get ourselves into heaven. Nothing about addressing the suffering of others, except to the extent that addressing the suffering of others might move us toward the head of the table. It's all a game with a heavenly Heisman trophy at stake. God's only role is as a score keeper – or something worse.

Many years ago, when I was a policeman, I answered a call at the hospital. Riding up in the elevator with me was a mother and her small daughter. The mother said to the

daughter, “You’d better be good or the policeman will get you and put you in jail.” Her remark was not only inappropriate, because it probably caused the child to fear the one person she might need help from if she were ever lost, but it’s also very like the way many view God – as sort of an ever-present policeman who will “get” you if you’re not good. We’ve been brought up to believe that God’s position on earth is that of judge and executioner. How we act and what we do while we’re here on earth determines what happens to us after we die which we view as the only thing that matters. God’s job is only to keep track of it. It’s a neat little contract – Do good now, get better later; do bad now, get worse later.

Do we ever stop to consider what this says about our understanding of God? If that view is correct, God is really no more than a score keeper. If Luther’s view in that letter is correct, God is really uninterested in what we do, so long as we recognize through the wealth of God’s glory the lamb who bears the sins of the world. Is it all about God’s love and what we do doesn’t matter or is it all about what we do and God’s only role is that of playground monitor? See? I told you we were wading in murky waters. So, what do we learn from today’s text?

Luke has chosen to relate the story of a sabbath dinner party at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, to which Jesus was invited. Jesus notices that the guests are jockeying for position at the table and He tells them a very odd parable – really just a retelling of Proverbs 25:6-7:

**Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,” than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.**

Jesus’ parable is set at a wedding feast. That’s a very formal occasion, and where people are seated is enormously important, then and now. (If you doubt that, just try putting the bride’s mother in the back by the kitchen door and see what happens.) In the parable, the guests were deciding the seating for themselves, based on their own estima-

tion of their worth. Jesus points out the inappropriateness of that course.

**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;**

In Jesus' parable, the host loves all, but it is not the privilege of the guests to decide for themselves how the seats should be allocated. Our judgment of our own worth and our own sins is always going to be more favorable to ourselves than it should be. Only the host is in a position to make the allocation of seating fair in the exercise of His impenetrable mystery. Jesus then begins to flesh out how the kingdom differs from the world. Jesus says,

**...when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.**

If we invite our rich neighbors or our friends, they will reciprocate, and everyone will have a couple of good dinners. Feed those who cannot reciprocate and your actions reflect into God's creation His love for you. Doing what I ought matters, but isn't something I do to earn my way into heaven. "This life is not and should not be regarded as a preparation for death. Let us prepare for life, not for death."<sup>1</sup> Doing what I ought is something I do to reflect God's love for me into the world.

What sort of behavior reflects God's love? The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

**Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

When we act in love, when we show hospitality, we are reflecting God's love because God acts from love and God shows hospitality. The writer of Hebrews continues, though:

**Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with**

---

<sup>1</sup> Reverend Philip S. Fall, founding pastor of FCC Frankfort and founding President of three different colleges for women, cir. 1845

**them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.**

If we could do this last, great, thing, we truly would be reflecting God's love into His creation because truly, truly I say unto you, God made of Himself flesh, and was imprisoned and was tortured and died. This love, the unfathomable love of God, is the image we are to reflect into the world. It isn't all about you, for that raises you to too great a place at the table, and it isn't all about God, for that reduces God to a mere functionary. It is about reflecting the relationship between you and God into Creation.

When we read these humbling words from Hebrews, and realize the impossibility of ever loving that fully, we are all convicted. We can take no other course but to sit down at the lowest place at God's table. And there, at the lowest place, where we know we belong, God meets us and says, "Friend, move up higher" and we learn that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

### **Why Did God Create Atheists?**

There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses this very question. The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson.

One clever student asks "What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?"

The Master responds "God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all — the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right."

"This means," the Master continued "that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say 'I pray that God will help you.' Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say 'I will help you.'"

*ETA source: Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2 by Mar*

---

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2016 J. Stewart Schneider

---