

August 28, 2022
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

I'm going to offer a very short homily today, because it's summertime and it's hot.

Besides, if ever there ever was a gospel reading that speaks for itself, it's the one we just heard. It's pretty simple. In a nutshell: when you're a guest, don't strive to enhance your own status; when you're a host, do invite those typically excluded; all this will pay off in the end.

You don't have to be the Son of God to come up with this. Jesus is really just saying what we already know deep inside. Two thousand years ago in Palestine or today in Connecticut, what he describes is simply basic human decency. Two thousand years ago in Palestine or today in Connecticut, what Jesus sees are a lot of people falling short.

I must admit that my faith in basic human decency has taken some hits recently. But I'm not yet ready to forsake my belief that an overwhelming majority of humans are intrinsically good. Even so, it would seem that intrinsic goodness is not enough to stop humans from falling short. It would seem that intrinsic goodness is not enough to keep *me* from falling short.

To be honest, I didn't really need Jesus to remind me of that today. I've been feeling pretty tender lately. Maybe it's just me. But maybe it's you, too. As for me, I've been thinking of a couple of lines from a particularly melancholy old song by the old folk rocker Jackson Browne. The song is "These Days" and the lines are these: "Don't confront me with my failures / I had not forgotten them."

As I prepped this homily, I Googled that song, and I learned that Jackson Browne wrote those words when he was 16 years old. I was no more than 16 years old when I first heard them. Then and now, they hit me like a punch in the gut. "Don't confront me with my failures / I had not forgotten them." But you know what? It's hard to imagine that any 16-year-old could possibly have had any truly important failures. At that age, I suspect that feelings of so-called failure can really only be chalked up the grasping doubt of self-worth. In our culture, the forces that influence self-worth start working early, pretty much at the age at which a child realizes they are a person apart from other people. By high school, they've had a lot of time to make their mark.

It doesn't seem that success over time isn't necessarily helpful in reversing the effects. In a related point, I heard Dr. Laurie Santos, the Yale happiness guru, talk in an interview about how elusive happiness is even for highly successful people. Her basic point is that, as a person courses through adulthood, they attain one measure of success, only to find another just out of reach.

Jesus calls foul on the entire enterprise. In today's reading, he does so during a Sabbath meal. In our tradition, you might say that we throw a dinner party for Jesus almost every Sunday. It's a special kind of dinner party, in part because the Eucharist operates on two planes. Simply put, the things we see also gesture toward the things we can't. To put it another way, our actions in the here-and-now also edge us toward the there-and-then.

On one hand: the seen and the here-and-now; on the other, the unseen and the yet-to come. We spend our lives in the tense gap in between. Preachers like to talk about how well-fed we are at the Eucharistic table. But, you know, it can't just be about our own individual and fleeting fullness. We ought to walk away from this table feeling both sated and hungry, both deeply satisfied and deeply unsatisfied, both grateful and galvanized. It's a both/and. If we embrace that both/and, we also embrace the reality of our existence in this already-but-not-yet Kingdom of God. Only then can we truly explore the possibilities intrinsic to our roles as agents of its realization.

It occurs to me that it's thorough all this that our own human goodness is not only accessed but also released. Released, it flows forth like vapor through the air. Human goodness is contagious: the cultivation of our own brings its cultivation in the world. We might imagine it as a pandemic of a different type, a pandemic of human goodness, a pandemic that yields not death but an explosion of miraculous life.