

Luke 14:7-14     The Resurrection of the Righteous  
August 28, 2022

I have been reading a novel series this summer about the 20th century, spanning from the time just before the first world war up until the late 1980s. It follows the experience of five families from several different backgrounds; Russian, German, English, Welsh, and American. There are also different social backgrounds; poor working families, aristocracy, and some in-between.

And one of the features of the relationships between these characters is that they *care*, about who gets invited to banquets and who doesn't, about who sits near the front and who in the rear, and about who is left out altogether. A great deal of energy is spent trying *not* to get left out, and trying to have a better place. And, of course, a great deal of energy is spent blundering about. Some even lose interest.

There are a couple of confessions to make. The first is that for reasons I do not understand, I do not relate very well to most of the characters. I don't share their experience. The second is that I am secretly enjoying reading about them.

When I read the text for the day from Luke's gospel, I recognized the same dynamic, human beings organizing their relationships in ways that involve hierarchies. Even though times have changed tremendously in the last 2,000 years, or even the last 100, these dynamics are still around.

What we read about is a banquet that was held at the home of a prominent person in that social world, an. It was someone who also happened to be a Pharisee. Jesus showed up and turned into a "people-watcher."

Interestingly, what Jesus said seems to indicate that he thought concern about status at these kinds of engagements was a worthy concern, only he disagreed with how to attain it. Rather than grasping at it, he thought it was better to take a more humble approach.

His suggestion is to assume a less important place than one might hope for. Then, if one is invited up, all the better. But if one assumes a higher place, it is embarrassing to be asked to sit closer to the rear, or in one of the satellite rooms.

He goes so far as to say that when banquets are given in the first place, they shouldn't regard social status from above, but from below. He says to invite the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind, "and you will be blessed. Although *they* can't repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." It reminds me of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25.

A little literary context: he then goes on to tell the parable of the Great Banquet, and then in the next chapter the parables about lost things; The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son. In-between the parable about the Great Banquet and the parables

about lost things, Jesus does something a little strange by our standards.

We are always trying to get more people to join up, become Christ-followers, at least to attend church, but Jesus sandwiches in-between these parables an accounting of the cost. It is as if he is trying to talk people out of it. “Any of you who does not give up everything he has, cannot be my disciple.” If you have heard, listen if you can.

The section of the Gospel of Luke just mentioned, which will be read at greater length over the next two Sundays, suggests that the answers to questions about the meaning of our lives, about what is more important and what is less important, about how to value people relative to each other, lie in places outside our normal expectations.

In this week’s case, it lies outside whatever are the prevailing codes of social status, things having to do with economic status, power. Perhaps we might think twice before seeking answers to ultimate questions there.

In this account from Luke, which is not a parable, by the way, even though it reads like one, it is hard to escape the distinction between those in prominent places, on the one hand, and the poor and blind and lame on the other. It is easy to be attracted to people of distinction, and sometimes repelled by those who lack it. One is confronted with the truth, however, that these distinctions have no ultimate meaning.

One feature of a meaningful life, if we interpret the gospel correctly, involves understanding that we are connected to and in relationship with those below as well as above us on the earthly scale of things. Partiality towards one, and the disregard of the other, doesn’t fly in the social world of Jesus.

And the pursuit of things of distinction, wealth and power, end up in disappointment. These things are not what they are cracked up to be. Meaning happens in relationships and it is best to have an open mind about such things because sometimes the most meaningful relationships happen outside the rigid categories. One never knows where grace and peace is to be found. It is best not to strap oneself in too tightly to a single set of possibilities.

Nonetheless, since we all do participate in the larger society with its categories, some thought about such things *is* recommended. In spite of ourselves, we do care about such things, just like the people in the novel, and at the banquet Jesus observed. In addition to the idea that economic, political, and social status is *not* the source of life’s meaning, what else can be said?

In other words, what is the meaning of the “resurrection of the righteous? What is Jesus saying when he uses that term? There is a mysterious quality about life; from whence does it come, and why? and what is its meaning? and where does it lead? One would like to suppose that the questions raised by this mystery would be interesting to everyone; young and

old, rich and poor, and all those in the middle, but most people seem pre-occupied with other things.

Like it or not, one cannot escape the idea of reversal that is found here, as elsewhere, in the bible.

“Everyone who exalts themselves, will be humbled, and everyone who humbles themselves will be exalted.” Humility is not only the way to greater meaning, but also to greater status.

The mystery of life’s meaning sometimes involves a sense of loss, when many of the things we thought might have significance, turn out to be empty, leading to a period of confusion and emptiness, and then a finding, and that is how the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel speaks of it. Or at this banquet, an invitation up.

Many of the best stories told are about the people who find their truest selves, or perhaps are found by the one who made them, after a struggle, involving a renewal of the mind and heart. I know that you all know these things, and if you are like me, struggle with them anyway.

Be reminded once again of God’s great salvation through Christ, in whom we have been found. It is a glorious exaltation that comes at the resurrection, as it were, of the righteous, where losing turns into finding, struggling turns into renewal, and a better sense of personal value lends meaning to our lives, as we make our way to heaven together.