

Unafraid – Ben Wayman

Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14

Why can't Jesus just play nice? Every single time he gets invited to a meal (and there are lots of meals in Luke), every time he's invited by someone with power and position, he flips their table. Why can't he just let things slide—keep his mouth shut and enjoy the food like the rest of the guests?

Today we have Jesus breaking bread on the Sabbath at a closed table with Pharisees and lawyers. The Pharisees were wildly popular during Jesus' time because they believed all God's people could and should be holy. The lawyers were not like our lawyers today, but were more like modern day Bible teachers. Luke calls them lawyers; other gospels call them scribes. So here's Jesus with a Christian leader, some popular pastors, and some local Bible profs.

Luke tells us Jesus is being watched closely by these pastors and profs, but as it turns out, Jesus is watching them closely too. And what Jesus sees is a bunch of social climbers grasping for power and position and promotion.

Meals in the ancient world were politically and socially loaded. The head couch was the place to be, but if you couldn't snag a seat there, you wanted to sit as close to that couch as possible. The host was the one who placed people and if it happened that you landed a spot at a top table and someone important showed up late, you would be asked to give up your seat and take whatever was left. So meals were calculated times of sizing yourself up against the other guests. It wasn't as crass as King of the Hill. It was more sophisticated, like Game of Thrones. Better make your move wisely.

But Jesus rejects the whole charade. What he's not doing here is offering strategic counsel on how to win friends and influence people. Rather, he challenges all the guests by reworking a wisdom saying from Proverbs and then critiquing the whole meal-system itself in light of the kingdom of God. We know this because that's exactly what parables do: they give us a snapshot of God's kingdom. And that's why Jesus can't play nice and he can't keep silent. The religious people cannot see that the kingdom of God is not about jockeying for position, but about living together as friends of God.

And this leads to the other problem Jesus observes: the pastor throwing the party doesn't know any of God's friends—because if he did, he'd want them at the meal, right? Here's where Jesus gets really awkward. He's just criticized all the guests, and now he turns on the host. Jesus is an equal opportunity critic. So he tells the Pharisee leader that his guest list is all wrong because these guests can reciprocate.

The repayment bit is super important because this gives us an insight into the kingdom of God and the people who live there: they're people who can't return favors or pay back generosity—the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. These are the people Jesus has come to save, and we've known this from the beginning of Luke's gospel and at every

step of the way to Jerusalem. What's more, not only are God's friends not invited to the meal, but most of them aren't even allowed in the synagogue or temple in the first place, because they were considered unclean by the Pharisees and lawyers.

And this is where things get awkward for us. Sometimes we act just like the Pharisees and lawyers; we exclude people from our table. Not all of the time—if you're like me, seeing and living in the kingdom of God is hit and miss. There are times I know what it looks like and I live in it. And there are other times when I'd just prefer to eat with my friends and relatives and rich neighbors.

So today Jesus flips the table on us. Hit and miss still falls short of the kingdom of God. Our readings today show us that we need to make new friends—to learn to see God's friends as the people we most want to eat and live with.

Another lesson today's readings teach us is that money plays a key role in our full embrace of God's kingdom as we make new friends. Will we be a kingdom people of generosity or a worldly people of safety? This is the main question I want to explore today: will we be a people that choose generosity or safety?

In a moment I'll come back to the decision between generosity or safety, but I want to be clear upfront that money is morally neutral. Depending on how it's used determines which kingdom we're living in: either the small kingdom of the Pharisees and lawyers, where there's only so much room at the table and the good seats are scarce, or the kingdom of God, where there's room and food for everyone in abundance. Rich people need Jesus too and there are many disciples who have learned to use their wealth generously for the kingdom of God.

That money is morally neutral can be seen in Psalm 112 and the letter to the Hebrews. The psalter celebrates how those who worship and honor and obey God will have *wealth and riches in their houses*. They are generous with their money and lend it without interest. They have been free with their money. They have *given it to the poor* and this investment in God's friends pays eternal dividends.

We see a similar approach to money in the letter to the Hebrews. Now it's important for us to know that the letter's audience has been severely persecuted. They have suffered. They have been publicly abused. They have been imprisoned. They have had their possessions stolen. And it appears that if they remain faithful to Jesus, they will likely be killed for it.

So it's all the more significant that the author of Hebrews encourages this persecuted people to *continue* loving others, and showing *hospitality to strangers*, and caring for prisoners, and keeping their *lives free from the love of money*. This letter, which reads more like a sermon, is preaching to these Christians to reject safety and choose generosity. They are to keep on sharing what little they have left, even if doing so puts them at great risk. "Keep living in God's kingdom of generosity," the preacher says.

These lessons make clear that money provides opportunities to fully embrace the kingdom of God. We have so many chances to make the most of this opportunity. Meals provide us chances for hospitality and fellowship with God's friends, many of whom are still strangers to us. We live in a low-income county with a college and federal prison that's full of people with whom we can live generously.

Our posture towards money either displays the generosity of the kingdom of God or the self-interested safety that concerns this broken world. Generosity and safety are incompatible. This is not a time for both/and. It's generosity **or** safety. It would seem that the contrast is between generosity or greed, but today's readings show us how much courage is required to be a generous people. Greed is not so much about self-indulgence and hoarding as it is about minimizing risk and keeping danger and suffering at arm's length. Choosing safety means we are unwilling to take the risks of living generously.

So we have a choice before us today. Will we choose generosity or safety? This question is at the heart of whether we will fully embrace the Kingdom of God.

Let me give you an example: how can we possibly show hospitality to strangers *and* choose safety?

On June 17, 2015, a group of Christians welcomed a stranger into their Wednesday night Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina. After an hour with these Christians, during a time of prayer, the stranger stood up, pulled a gun from his fanny pack and killed nine members of the Bible study, including 87-year old Susie Jackson and the church pastor. The Christians of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church chose generosity over their own safety, and they were killed for it.

Make no mistake, people of St Paul's, following Jesus is not safe. Christianity is not safe. When we were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we died to our own safety and chose instead to fall into the generous, hospitable, and loving arms of God.

It makes sense, then, that after encouraging the people to be generous to strangers, the author of Hebrews says: *The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?* The author is praying Psalm 118. Like Psalm 118, our psalm today shows us that living as God's people gives us a kind of courage that the world can never know. As God's children, our hearts are steady and firm. We are not afraid of evil in the world. We are not afraid of anything or anyone because we trust in God who has conquered death and the devil. What can anyone do to us?

It's been just over a year since the murder of the nine Christians in Charleston who showed hospitality to a stranger. The church continues to be generous because these people continue to follow Jesus. This summer, a year after the killings, "more than 150 people gathered for the Wednesday Bible study, the same event where the shooting occurred last year. This time, it was led by Rev. Anthony Thompson, whose wife, Myra Thompson, died at the church shooting last year." At the one-year mark, the church held

several worship services and a community supper and unity event open to the public. (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/17/us/charleston-mass-shooting-anniversary/>) Here is a group of Christians who have chosen to follow Jesus rather than secure their own safety. And here we have a glimpse of the kingdom of God and the people who live there.

One of my favorite bits from C. S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe is when Susan first encounters the tension of following Aslan and being safe. When learning that Aslan is a lion and not a man, Susan asks, "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." (Lewis, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; Harper Trophy 2000, 80).

Following Jesus is the greatest adventure we can ever choose. It's not at all safe, but it's good, and it's true. And because following Jesus places us in the arms of the living God, we have nothing to fear. May we continue to be a courageous people who loves without fear, shows hospitality to strangers, and invites all people to this Table and the tables in our homes.