



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 17, AUGUST 28, 2022  
JEREMIAH 2:4-13; PSALM 81: 1, 10-16; HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16; LUKE 14:1, 7-14

## CATHEDRAL LINGUISTICS



**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.”]*

As you may know, I recently returned from being part of two pilgrimages involving folks from this wonderful community. For two weeks in late July, 28 of us made our way across Scotland and Northumbria as we engaged our Celtic forebears, and then Kathy and I caught a train to southern England to spend two weeks with the Evensong Choir as they sang in residence at Chichester Cathedral and then Bristol Cathedral. It was an experience full of blessings.

Along the way, I had occasion to meet with my fellow deans in Edinburgh, Durham, York, Chichester and Bristol, and the topic of language, dialects and accents arose in nearly every conversation. The same was the case in most conversations with locals there—from Scottish trills to Bristolian brogue. I was intrigued by the regional differences, and I know my southern twang slipped out quite often, prompting remarks from our hosts.

Alongside this series of linguistic encounters, I serendipitously happened upon an online article by one of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggemann.<sup>1</sup> His main thesis in the essay is that the dialect of faith must resist aligning with the commodified language of empire if it is to remain true. And as I sat in

majestic cathedrals across Britain, pondering the particularly complicated history of the Church that grew alongside its twin of imperialism, I found myself considering what it means for us, here at Saint Mark’s Cathedral, in the Pacific Northwest, as we come to terms with American imperialism. We speak English in this corner of the continent because our forebears went west.

As we consider what Jesus says in the gospel today, we can take it at face value, and literally consider where we should sit around a table for dinner. But Jesus is speaking parabolically here, and it is helpful to remember that the word parable literally means “cast alongside life,” allowing the story to seep into the crevices of our lives, including our blind spots, upsetting the status quo, seeing our world in different light.

So, if taken not at face value, but parabolically, Jesus is speaking not about dinner parties but about power dynamics more generally, and our interest in them, or more to the point, our interest in where we fit into those power structures. He is saying don’t be guided by such ego-driven impulses.

This gospel admonition might play out in all sorts of gatherings in which we find

ourselves: at work, in family systems, in community groups, and even in church... Surely there are lessons to be gleaned for us as individuals in how we fall into or resist such paradigms of power in such settings. Hierarchies of power take all sorts of form. There is an invitation to each of us offered in today's gospel to consider where those temptations to power and prestige snag us.

But there is also a corporate aspect to this that I want to explore with you today; one which has implications for us in this cathedral community. In his article, Brueggemann begins by citing a quote often attributed to sociolinguist Max Weinrich who said, "*Language is a dialect with an army and navy.*"

The implication is that it is by hegemonic power and military force that the language of empire quashes local culture, including local dialects. Even the term *lingua franca*, which we use to describe the language of local use, arose from medieval reality of Charlemagne's expansionist actions, insisting that French would be spoken across his realm.

More recently, through the British and American empires, English has become the *lingua franca* of a global economy. That's not all bad, but there is a loss of diversity in the translation. Or we might ask, what is lost in

translation when local dialects concede to the dialect with an army and navy?

Bristol Cathedral is grappling with the fact that slave traders in that port city gave much of the money to build the cathedral. There are still monuments to their legacy in the place. They are now asking: Should they remove them? How shall they tell the story differently going forward so that this truth becomes part of the narrative?

While sitting in that cathedral in Bristol, I found myself pondering the origin and history of my cathedral, this one, my spiritual home, and wondered: timber money built this cathedral, and I am grateful for the vision that brought this sacred church into being. But I know indigenous communities were displaced to make way for the timber industry in this region. I know indigenous cultures were largely annihilated in the process. What are we to do with that today? Is this our version of imperial hegemony that we are being called to address? What is the church's complicity in the injustice?

If all this makes you squirm a bit in your seat, know that you are not alone. It makes me uneasy, too. And I don't have any easy answers. But if we are squirming in our seats, then perhaps Jesus' parable is speaking to us—move to a different seat. Which is to say,

we must ask ourselves, what must we change in ourselves to see the power dynamics at play in our lives for what they are.

Brueggemann's thesis is that our language of faith must resist the *lingua franca* of power and prestige, holding fiercely to a dialect that refuses tales of wealth or victory, must refuse visions of selfish security at the expense of others, must refuse commodification of life grounded in fear, scarcity, and greed. If we hold fast to this, there is a subversive strength to what our mother language of faith has to offer—not just to us, but through us to the world.

This is not an easy consideration, my friends, and there are consequences to us individually

and corporately if we choose to lean into this work, especially in a time when the *powers that be* appear to be hell-bent on reducing everything and everyone to a tradable commodity.

The peculiar language of faith is, by definition, relational—that is, covenantal—which means that the steadfast God who is calling us to such a faith is the very Word of hope and truth and good spoken into the world, inviting us to hear and respond. We know this language; it is healing balm for all the world. It is the parlance of the God of Love. And it is the language we have to share in this time and in this place. May we have courage to speak this truth in love.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Peculiar Dialect of Faith.” Walter Brueggemann. Published online January 12, 2021. <https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/the-peculiar-dialect-of-faith?format=amp>

