



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 17, SEPTEMBER 1, 2019  
SIRACH 10:12-18; PSALM 112; HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16; LUKE 14:1, 7-14

## PRIDE AND DISTANCE

**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.”]*

I read a book of short stories in May that I’ve been mulling over all summer. It’s called *Anything is Possible* by Elizabeth Strout, and it’s set in Amgash, Illinois, a fictional small town. Each of the nine stories flows from the vantage point of a different person—the retired high school janitor, the Viet Nam vet, the guidance counselor, the nursing home aide and others.

As the stories accumulate, the losses and longings of the characters are revealed,

sometimes across generations. There is a matter-of-factness about the way Strout describes their hard lives, and you sense the characters can behave no other way, either in their petty selfishness or their stunning generosity. When I finished the book, I found myself wondering about the missing details. Is Charlie’s PTSD easing? How can Lila do so well in school? With a novel, there’s a powerful omniscience that pulls you into the protagonist and it seems you know the characters inside and out; but with Strout’s

stories, you remain at a distance and are always aware of what you don't know.

That sense of distance and not knowing can be unsettling, but that's a good thing, I think. Because I can be so at home in a singular viewpoint—my own—I lose sight of others. We become so engrossed in the story in which we are the only character who appears in every scene, that we miss the rich, unique, and complex stories that swirl around us. The ones we might know and love better if we got some distance from our own.

The first reading from Sirach warns against the kind of pride that comes from assuming our own experience is objective reality. Sirach was written in the second century BCE, part of the wisdom tradition that includes Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The author is writing to Jews who are influenced by Greek culture and who no longer feel a deep need for God. Sirach calls that pride and he denounces this pride, which he says, “withdraws the heart from its Maker.” He is calling them back to their tradition of reverence and humility in response to their holy, ineffable God. That is what the “fear of God” really means. Not being afraid of a stern judge but responding to God's power and ineffability with reverence and humility.

In the gospel today, Jesus builds on this wisdom tradition. He has been invited to the house of a leading Pharisee for the sabbath meal. It is the most special meal of the week and he is likely rubbing shoulders with the most wealthy, powerful, and pious of the religious community. They watch him closely and he watches them back. The guests jockey for position, trying to grab a seat closest to the host, a place of honor. Each is locked in his own viewpoint where the story of this dinner is about one person—himself—and everyone else is a bit player meant to validate his importance. So, Jesus tells them a parable.

When you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't take the best seat at the table. There might be someone there who deserves it more and when your host moves you to a lower spot, you'll be embarrassed. Instead, take the seat no one else wants. Your host will make sure you have the right place. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Now this is a parable, not literal instruction on table etiquette, so while it offers solid advice for gatherings of powerful people, it's about much more. The verb that is translated as “exalt” also means “lift up,” and it appears several other times in the gospels. Mary uses it in the *Magnificat* as she praises God's

power in the world, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.” And this word is used when Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, “When the Son of Man is lifted up, you will realize that I am doing as the father instructed me.”

In the gospel, Jesus continues to speak to the host. “When you have a dinner, don’t only invite your friends and family. Include the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed when the righteous are raised up.” There is that metaphor again—resurrection, lifting up, being one with God.

Jesus is calling these people back down to earth, out of their pride and self-aggrandizement to a place of humility and reverence. And he promises that when they widen their circle, inviting the poor and marginalized into the heart of the banquet, they will be blessed. Blessed, for sure, by their practice of radical hospitality and the love and mercy that flows from it. And also blessed by that gift of distance. Where we are pulled out of our identity as the main character in the story and given space to appreciate and bless the unique and holy lives of others.

There’s something else, too. As I read Strout’s book, I realized that being held at a distance from her stories allows us to see something that the individual characters cannot. Each of them is isolated in some way and feels like an outsider. But we see how their stories brush up against each other and become intertwined. How childhood mistakes can be repaired in middle age. How the kindness of parents is paid back to their children, without anyone knowing. And how the most unlikely people provide the perfect balm of healing for others.

Despite the harshness and deprivation of their lives, there are threads of tenderness, resilience and steely dignity that weave Amgash together, generation after generation. The presence of the Holy One saturates it all.

And so it is for us, generation after generation. Offering our hearts to this presence of God, staying rooted in reverence and humility, is the only way I know that can sustain us in these times when a person goes on a senseless shooting spree in Odessa, Texas that leaves seven dead. We must not look away; we must speak out and vote against this violence and stand with those who suffer as a result. In the face of such overwhelm, it is instinctive to withdraw or

close off, but the heart must move toward its maker.

I leave you with a poem by the Polish-American Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz. It's called "Love."

*Love means to learn to look at yourself  
The way one looks at distant things  
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,  
Without knowing it, from various ills.  
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.*

*Then he wants to use himself and things  
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.  
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:  
Who serves best doesn't always understand.  
For you are only one thing among many.*



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