

Ambitions
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Colebrook Congregational Church
August 28, 2016 / 15th Sunday After Pentecost

Most of what we hear from Jesus is in the form of parables, lessons, teachings, and even puns and jokes. Today's scripture, though, is just good advice. Jesus advises of the behavior of guests and also of motivations for hosts, and I believe that both boil down to ambition.

Now, the first part, the advice for guests and assigned seats of honor. I've been wondering, are their such things anymore? Wedding parties? Friar's Club Roasts? But probably the closest we have are formal state dinners. There too, as in Jesus' advice, the closer you are seated to the host, the more important you are seen to be. Especially if that sort of thing is important to you.

How about, when we were all kids, and our parents held some big meal...a dinner party or holiday dinner, there were usually two tables, right? One for the adults, and one for the kids. As a little kid, that was the probably the fun table, but eventually, as you grew older, you wanted to move up to the adult table, having that ambition to be at the more desirable table.

And that is the good type of ambition, to reach higher and farther than where you are. Like the life of Abraham Lincoln. He was self-educated and had a good work ethic, saving up money to strike out on his own. He became a businessman, and volunteered for the militia. Then he joined the civil service as a postmaster and a county surveyor, while he continued to educate himself, becoming a lawyer, then a politician where he preserved the union, abolished slavery, and modernized the economy.

His ambition ultimately served others and benefited others, not his own glory.

But what of the other type of ambition? The type that Jesus warns against, the type that offends, alienates, and embarrasses?

I have mentioned before a disagreeable person in the retro-futuristic artist community I am a part of. He had declared himself the pre-eminent artist of the genre in New England. I once saw him on social media tear into a friend of mine for having the temerity to plan a Maker's Faire in New Hampshire without running it by him first. And he did stuff like that often, inserting himself into everyone's business and plans, as if his ambition was running to an extreme level.

There was a large event in Massachusetts that asked me to headline a couple of maker's panels on painting and metalwork. I saw that this event only had panels covering a narrow range of topics, so I offered to organize ten maker's panels, covering many topics, and sitting on none myself. I made sure that amazing New England artists got to showcase their work, and share their expertise.

When the disagreeable person heard about this, he assumed that I was trying to snatch honors for myself, putting myself on all ten panels, and he reacted badly. When he was corrected, he could not understand my motivation, nor my lack of self-serving personal ambition, that he lets rule his life.

At the event, he assumed that he would be the most honored guest, receiving the adoration of the attendees, but there was another guest maker who was also invited, who had all the same skills as the disagreeable person, but not the disagreeable personality, and his ambition was not of the offensive kind. He was the stand out most popular guest there. Everyone sought out his company and turned their backs on the disagreeable person.

The disagreeable person was like the guest that Jesus was warning against, ambitiously assuming honors he was not entitled to, and suffered the embarrassment of having to shift down several seats.

Ambition can be good or bad. Good ambition drives you forward, motivates you, and can give your life a sense of fulfillment. But if ambition is not handled in a good and loving way, it can become bad. Ambition pursued at all costs, without regard to consequences, can cost relationships, and even lives.

Ambitiously assuming honors, like the guest, can lead to embarrassment when the host has to correct the situation, which is not comfortable for anyone involved. Can you imagine Jesus, who would certainly be seated in a place of honor, just walking into a room and sitting there? I cannot. I believe that He would let His host lead him there!

And Jesus also redirects our earthly efforts from bad and meaningless ambitions. He advises us to not only invite those to socialize who can help with our ambitions, because those ambitions lead only to an earthly reward. A greater reward is attained through helping those in need. So, when looking at how we let ambition guide our lives, we should examine it closely. We should ask: Can we find fulfillment in our lives if the pursuit of our ambitions leave nothing that makes life worth living?

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Gracious God, we give You thanks for the good advice You give us today through Your Word. May we remember it well as examine ourselves and how we use our ambitions, remembering how it can effect others around us; and that we may, with Your guidance, find opportunities to love and serve our neighbors. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

God of salvation, hear our prayers on behalf of those who are lost in our day, receiving these petitions and thanksgivings with your unending compassion.

There is none like Your love, Your generosity, Your gifting and Your hospitality. We thank You that You are in our lives, working in us and through us to let people know Your kingdom is open to all.

You have given us a world of beauty, and we have spoiled it. A world to feed us, and so many go hungry. A world of riches, and we are unwilling to share. A world to care for, and we think only of ourselves. Forgive us, gracious God, for our selfishness, every time we have no thought for others, no cares but ours. Enable us to see this world as a gift from you that can be shared, and those who live on it as our neighbors.

Be with all who need you. The distraught, the lost, the needy, the hungry, the displaced by fire or water or eviction. Be with those who struggle with addiction, and those who are unwell in mind, body, or spirit. Be with the victims of violence and their loved ones. Help us to comfort them with Your abundant Love.

We pray that You help lead us through our own trials, the sufferings and sorrows, the challenges and struggles, and grant us the wisdom we need. Fill us with hope, sustained in Your mercy, giving us guidance through Your Word, and stamina through Your Spirit. And empower us to continue to be Your hands and feet, to continue the work that needs to be done in so many places.

We especially pray for:

Hear the prayers of our hearts, O God of justice, Your word is light and truth. Let Your face shine on us to restore us, that we may walk in Your way, seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

Psalm 112

Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments. Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever. They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever. They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor. The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

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."