

August 28, 2016

Tim Hughes

Sermon: "Hunger Games"

The Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 2:4-13

⁴Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ⁶They did not say, "Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" ⁷I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. ⁸The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

⁹Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children's children. ¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. ¹¹Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

The New Testament Reading: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And

you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon:

This sermon is for our youth.

Our young people. Our 6th-12th graders. To be clear, it’s not a sermon *about* our youth. It’s written for them. To them. It’s true that many of you are not here right now. That’s alright. We have talked a fair amount in the past year about why you often don’t come to worship. One of the reasons that you shared is that it is so self-evident that the sermons are written for adults, not for youth.

So this one is written for you. Maybe it’s appropriate, given that so many of you are going back to school tomorrow, that it starts with two different school lunchrooms.

The first lunchroom is my elementary school cafeteria. Now, I know that this is going to sound insane and make me seem as old as the hills but I grew up in a place and time where students were paddled for misbehaving. Physically hit with a wooden paddle in a workroom. I know this because I was physically hit with a wooden paddle in a workroom. More than once.

I know, I can’t believe it either. The paddle was wooden with holes drilled through it and it had a little frowny face drawn on it with a Sharpie, as though there was some sort of concern that we would be confused about how we were supposed to feel about all of this.

At any rate, on the day in question, I was in the workroom because earlier at lunch I had thrown a Tupperware container – with innocent, carefree abandon, as I remember it. But the container hit another student in the lunchroom squarely in the back of the head, and because hitting children is wrong, I found myself in the workroom, about to get paddled by my Kindergarten teacher. That’s right. I was in Kindergarten.

When it was all over, I had a question for my teacher. A question that she reported to my mother on the phone later that afternoon. The question I asked was this: “Does this mean that I can’t sit next to you at lunch anymore?”

Now I don’t know whether or not I was the ultimate teacher’s pet or just a master manipulator but it *is* true that I liked to sit next to Mrs. Powell in the lunchroom every day and it seems that my question broke her heart, without a doubt. She told my mother that I was a very sweet kid and she was sure that this incident was some sort of rare accident. My status as her lunch mate was secure.

That’s lunchroom number one. Lunchroom number two is my middle school cafeteria. It might look something like your cafeteria. Whereas in elementary

school we were walked in orderly lines to the cafeteria, in this middle school we were released like hounds when lunchtime arrived, bounding down the hallways of the school as though our lives depended on it.

The reason for this desperate sprint was not hunger or exercise. It was because we all knew the terrible truth, that there were only eight seats bolted to each cafeteria table and that where you sat in there mattered a lot. The cool kids sort of rode in Business class, you know, not even breaking a sweat on their walk, yet their seats always seemed available to them with extra legroom and complimentary cocktails. Those of us who rode coach, however, jockeyed and grumbled and left most of our dignity behind us as we ran – ran! – down those long shiny hallways to the lunchroom.

There were, to be sure, some kids who didn't care, who did their own thing, who refused to participate in the Lunchroom Hunger Games. I admired those kids, but I was not one of them. I was one of the kids who would risk injury to body-slam myself into a seat already partially occupied by someone else.

Thinking back on those days, I don't know what is more painful – that I was never cool enough to be secure or that I was so naked in my ambition to hold that place of honor.

When I think back on those two lunchrooms now, I marvel a little bit at my Kindergarten self – not particularly afraid of the paddle or worried about what other kids were doing. I just wanted to hang out with my middle-aged friend.

But somewhere between Kindergarten and 6th grade I learned how to climb the ladder, to climb over other people, even, all so that I could sit closer to people who never really liked me anyway.

Today's story – the one from Luke - is sort of a Biblical twist on the lunchroom situation. The setting is a dinner among religious leaders, Jesus' frenemies to be sure. It's a dinner but Jesus takes the opportunity to paint pictures of much bigger parties – epic wedding banquets.

Jesus calls it a parable but unlike most of his parables this one is told in the second-person. “When you are invited by someone to a party,” he begins, “do not sit in the place of honor.” Almost immediately to me he comes off less like a storyteller and more like a parent telling us how to act.

Most of the parables play out like little stories. This “parable” is not like that. “When you are invited,” he says, “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.” (14:10)

The directions are not so different from what an actual Sunday School teacher might have told me, repeatedly, when I started applying my Hunger Games mentality to the church functions.

But what irks me about the parable, at least this first portion of it, is not that it's about table manners. What truly bothers me is that it still seems to be about getting ahead, just in a sneakier way. How much difference is there, in the end, between body-slamming yourself into a VIP seat and manipulating yourself into it through false modesty?

It's not that I don't see the value in these general principles that Jesus is laying out. It's just that I'm left wishing for a little bit more. Maybe I've just been shushed by one too many church people. Maybe you have too. But I'm looking for teaching that goes a little deeper than good behavior.

If we're being honest, I think that a lot of adults imagine church as a sort of finishing school for children and young people. Teaching you to share. To feel an appropriate amount of guilt about swearing. To learn the Lord's Prayer by heart so you don't have to mumble your way through funerals as an adult.

If this is true, then Jesus' lesson in table manners is straight out of that book. Hold the door open for others. Give up your seat on the bus. Etc. Etc.

I don't know – does anyone else just want Jesus to let it rip? To flip the banquet tables and ask the people to wake up? To usher in a new kind of reality where we aren't constantly angling to be the most popular person in the room?

We claim to be a Resurrection People but all too often we are just policing the etiquette of the grave. If Jesus is just a really great Cotillion instructor is it any wonder that more and more of you are declining that invitation?

Or even worse, you aren't declining it. And in the process you are buying into the ladder-climbing mythology of our culture with our very own seal of religious approval.

I want to talk about stress for a second.

I'm stressed by how stressed you are. You carry it gracefully, for the most part, but I know how worried you are about college, for example. Admissions, top choices, safety schools, application deadlines, SATs – they lurk in the background of so many of our conversation. I know how you are worried about your sports, or theater, or dance, or debate. Pick an extracurricular and you all are incredibly good at it and also incredibly worried about it.

Let's be clear here – I'm not blaming this on you or your parents or even any particular teacher. It's not anyone's fault and it's everyone's fault. It's our culture. But man does it weigh on you. And you are running, running, running. Running down the hallways, running to practice, running to work, running because you know that there is only so much space at the table and where you end up sitting is very important. If we've told you that once, we've told you that a thousand times.

And here is my fear. My fear is that at times, you come to church, because you want to, because you have to, because you are hoping, maybe, for some relief for the weight of the world, and we are just one more place where you find out that the real work is self-improvement. Being the best "you" you can possibly be.

I worry that you come here and it's just another place where you receive a grade – are you holy enough? Are you put-together enough? Do you know these Bible stories we are constantly mentioning but not fully explaining? Have you managed to meet some vague standard of sexual purity that we talk about but don't really talk about because we are too embarrassed about our own sexuality?

I worry sometimes that in our anxiety to be the church to you we've just become one more lunchroom you have to negotiate. If that is the case then we have exchanged the Gospel for some else. For something that does not profit you or us or the Kingdom of God.

When Perry and I were in Israel this spring, I was amazed by the some of the engineering we saw in the old cities. In particular, the city of Petra – which is something straight out of Indiana Jones. Literally – Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Petra was built 2500 years ago, and it's hidden away inside of these sandstone canyons in Jordan. That's why it's been there so long. But the canyon we walked through to access the city was lined with miles of aqueduct channels, carved just so into the sandstone so that rainwater would flow to the heart of the city where the people could drink it.

It's incredible. Israel's so-called Iron Age, 1200-500 BC, brought so many innovations exactly like that to the Israelite people. They started to inhabit areas previously thought uninhabitable. They started to grow new foods they never thought they would eat. They prospered.

There's nothing wrong with any of that. But along the way they also started to forget their own story. They started to forget how they have been brave, yes, but they had also been carried by God through desert after desert. Look how the prophet Jeremiah uses these aqueducts, these cisterns, as a metaphor to talk about the spiritual death of the people:

My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.... my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and [they have] dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (2:13)

I think that we, the church, have gotten a lot of things right – don't get me wrong. But it's also not surprising to me that we the *American* church, bathed and marinated in capitalism and manifest destiny since the day we were born, we are co-opted from time to time by language of self-improvement. And make no mistake – when the church becomes another place for self-improvement, we are not doing our job.

We're all affected by this, but no doubt it has the greatest impact on you all. The youth. You may not even notice, because self-improvement is kind of your life.

The second half of Jesus' parable is a better reflection, in my humble opinion, of the heart of the matter.

When you are throwing a party, he says, don't invite your friends. How's that for social advice? Don't invite your friends. Don't invite your family either. Don't invite the rich people who will probably invite you to their sweet lake house for Labor Day. Instead, invite the lonely, the poor, the different, the limited, the afraid. Don't be too distracted by the antiquated language about disability here, because Jesus is really just talking about the people on the margins, which at one time or another is all of us. Invite all the losers from the economy class who never make it to the table.

Now. Look around you, Jesus says. This is the Kingdom of God.

And I know what you are thinking because I'm thinking it too. You are thinking – this whole loser party would make a killer college essay. Or community service hours. Or an article, maybe at least, in the church newsletter here. And don't get me wrong – we would write that article.

But try your best, and I will try too, not to think that way. Because when we do that, we are exchanging our glory for something that is worthless.

Here's what I think is kind of mind-blowing about this "parable" from Jesus. In the first half of the story, you are the guest, sitting in the worst seat, wishing you could do better, hedging your bets. I have a hard time being patient with this part of the story because I know all too well how it feels to be in that spot. I'd like to believe I'm not in the spot.

But, in the second half of the story, Jesus abruptly shifts his focus. You are the host. You are the one with the power. You are the one graciously inviting the least likely loser to the place of honor. I like this role much better. It's a good look for me.

Here is the truth of it –the Gospel truth of it. You are never not both. We are always both. We are always guest and host. We're not lying when we tell you that each one of you is so gifted. You are gifted and beautiful and loved by God. You can own that. Be proud of that.

But maybe we don't tell you this enough - each of us so hopelessly broken. We are not going to make the team. We're not going to get an invitation. We are human beings, finite and flawed. We're going to die. You act like you don't know this but I know you do.

We are not going to make the team by any standard of the world and yet we – you and I – we are invited to the table by Jesus himself. We have been given seats of incredible honor. If we the adult church have one job it is this – to let this the one place where you can live that truth. And find the courage to live it for others.

We fail at this the majority of the time. But we also do it enough – I hope – that you have tasted Christ's presence here.

I can say very honestly that I have regularly seen Christ's presence in you. I saw it yesterday, even, when thirty of you were bobbing down the Shenandoah River in inner tubes. If you weren't there, adults, try to picture this – our young people in 30 bright orange tubes on a picture-perfect day.

Our young people floating downstream in webs of connection, arms and legs draped across the water, sometimes in the center, sometimes on the margins, holding themselves together in fluid forms as they laughed and listened to each other.

Our young people who are not perfect by a long shot. Who sometimes exclude and hurt each other in this crazy scramble to be on the top. They are OUR young people, after all.

But anyway, you were floating downstream in water that seemed to be alive on its rippling surface, carrying you, finally not running, but resting and laughing and listening to each other, your phones locked in cars that were miles away.

That's church to me. We move forward together. Not always running but sometimes being carried. Never not mindful of the living water that sustains us. Never not mindful that we are not enough and - hallelujah – that is as it should be.

May that image be my prayer for you and for me. For us. The church.

Amen.