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Jeremiah 2:4-13

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A HIGHER TABLE

When our family made a vacation trip to California a number of years ago, what ended up being my least favorite activity for the trip involved going to the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Over 2600 stars with the names of individuals and some groups on them are set into the sidewalks for a period of blocks. Fans of various stars take pictures of the names of those with whom they are enamored, and there are people dressed up like certain celebrities in hopes that someone will want to pay them to have their picture taken with them. Fame is a funny thing in our society. There are people who desperately want it and some are willing to objectify themselves or do just about anything to attain or hold onto it. Such things make me wonder what is going on in someone's psyche that leads to such a thirst for fame.

It was a slightly different thirst for renown in a situation Jesus addressed as told in our gospel reading from Luke. We get a glimpse of that time in what seemed to be an intricate system of etiquette and honor that governed even the serving of guests in the home. Meals with invited guests became occasions where strict social divisions were encoded. Who was invited, where and with whom they sat, even what they were fed, told the story of who had significance and who lacked it. At many gatherings, there were various levels of affluence and influence, so some of the guests got treated as if they were very important, and some got treated as if they were not. The host typically was at the center of the gathering and the more important guests would be seated nearby. However, should a person of higher status arrive late, social custom permitted the host to tell a guest already seated near the center to give up his seat. This would be tantamount to a social disaster in that time and place.

Jesus calls into question the assumptions behind such a system, primarily that certain people have an intrinsic value that is greater than or less than that of others. He followed a similar task, carried out by the prophet Jeremiah, who identified God and God's ways as being the fountain of living water that never runs dry, whereas

human pursuits were akin to cisterns that were cracked and could not hold water. Of course, the whole value of a cistern is that it is to be watertight and does not leak. But what was supposed to be the community of faith had chosen to pursue human constructs that could not hold water. They knew who had delivered them from slavery, who had provided a good land for them, and who had met their every need, but still they devised systems of value that ignored God's ways. Their values and priorities did not hold water in comparison to God's values and priorities.

Jesus shook his head as well at the intricate systems that indicated the importance of only certain people that became a primary ingredient for their self-image. It made no sense to put one's worth on the line based on an individual's arbitrary choice that someone was to be honored over someone else even at the fanciest banquet in town, particularly when the very Creator of the universe had invited all of the people to God's banquet table. Why pursue being considered a star by others when the One who created all the true stars in the sky invites you and me to the highest table there is? What more is needed in order to have good self-esteem? The One who has made us, given us life, provided for our needs, granted direction for our paths and redemption when we have gone astray has invited us to a much grander banquet in this life and in the life to come. Who has a greater ability to establish what is truly of value than God? Other systems of who is important don't hold water.

For those who could host an event, Jesus also addressed the priorities behind the invitation list. Most would host a banquet to try to increase their own standing in the community. But Jesus encourages people of faith to do so in order to build community itself. Those who were at the periphery of the community in that setting included the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. These people had little to no influence to benefit the host of a banquet. But Jesus says these are the very people who need to be included, who need to be fed, who need to be bolstered in their understanding of who they are as beloved children of God, so they should be the first to be invited in order for all to grow in an experience of Godly community. Jesus calls us to reach beyond our circles not just for the sake of others, but for our sake as well. For it is not just receiving grace that transforms us, true transformation happens when we extend grace with no expectation of anything in return.

We live in a world where most anything is viewed as being for sale. So a price is put on a huge range of objects. There are a wide range of factors that affect the price, including supply and demand, materials used, labor costs, shipping costs, advertising costs, and more. In such a setting, where there is a price on so much, it is easy to get confused about the difference between value and cost. There are pictures of my wedding and of brand new babies in our family that cost very little, would bring no dollar value at all on E-bay, but have a very high worth for my family. On this Labor Day weekend, I recognize that there are workers who make a wide range of different salary levels. There are a wide variety of market factors that affect those salary levels, but we mustn't confuse that with levels of worth. Garbage collection workers may be near the bottom of the pay scale, but if we were without them for a short time during the hotter months, our noses and the deterioration of our public health would tell us of their value.

Other than in the sordid world of human trafficking, prices are not put on humans themselves, and of course, there never should be a price put on a human being as an object to be sold. But that is because the worth of any human cannot be measured in dollars. If God carried pictures in the divine phone or wallet or purse of those who God values, whose pictures would God include? Only about 7.7 billion of us! Even those who have the fewest abilities for which they might be paid a salary have immense worth as the beloved children of God. It is the God revealed in Jesus Christ who particularly values those who are on the periphery of society, because they and the world need to know they are highly-valued by God. It is the God revealed in Jesus Christ who so detests exclusion and human systems of valuing certain people over others that he is willing to die to show it. It is the God revealed in Jesus Christ who delights in welcoming all people to the grandest banquet imaginable as a way of expressing the divine love that defines our and others' true value.

As we allow our values and how we regard other people to be shaped by the God whose love never runs dry, we will come to realize that human systems of value simply do not hold water. Those who have responded to God's grand invitation may not be able to make a water-tight case of it, but we have experienced and we affirm that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is and ever will be the true life of the party.