

11-10-19 SERMON CCI Luke 14: 1-14 Don't Pull Down the Shades

Tis time to plan for Thanksgiving dinner. Pull out the recipes, light the candles, put out the special dishes and napkins, and welcome our guests with joy. Eating a delicious meal with people we love is one of the best experiences of life, yet it's becoming a lost art. Who remembers when we ate dinner together every evening growing up? Remember when there was only one phone in the house and no one answered it during dinner? When there were no cell phones and people actually talked to each other?

American Baptist author and pastor, Tony Campolo, tells a different story of having dinner. He was in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, checking on mission programs that his organization carried out in Haiti and he wanted to see how the workers were doing emotionally and spiritually. At the end of a long day, he was tired, so, with great relief, he sat down to eat dinner at a French restaurant in the heart of Port-au-Prince. He was seated next to the window so he could enjoy watching the activity on the street outside.

The waiter brought a delicious looking meal and set it in front of him. Tony was about to dive in when he looked to his right. Four children from the streets were staring at his food with their noses pressed against the window. The waiter quickly pulled down the window shade, shutting out the sight of the hungry children, and said to Tony, "Don't let them bother you. Enjoy your meal."¹

In today's scripture reading, we find Jesus at a dinner party and he faced the decision whether to pull the blinds down on a man who needed healing. It was a dinner gathering at the home of a **prominent** Pharisee who had invited other Pharisees and legal experts, and Jesus. It was also Sabbath, the day of rest and worship. The day when no work was allowed to be done, you were only allowed to walk so many steps, were allowed to carry only so much weight. Luke tells us that the host and guests were watching Jesus carefully.

A man with dropsy showed up. Dropsy was what we would call edema or swelling today - probably from cardiac, renal or liver disease. It is not clear whether this sick man was on the street outside the house as Jesus came inside, or the man was inside the house. Was he invited perhaps to trap Jesus into breaking a Sabbath rule? Jesus seems to know what was happening and he yanked the shades up high: "Is it right to heal on the Sabbath?" The religious experts didn't dare answer. Jesus knew that they would not have hesitated to rescue a donkey or ox trapped in a well on the Sabbath, but they were quite willing let the man before them suffer while they enjoyed a peaceful Sabbath meal. But Jesus didn't allow such hypocrisy. Jesus healed him, and sent him on his way rejoicing, because for Jesus, what better day for God's healing power to be seen than on the day set aside for worshipping God?

Then Jesus noticed the others around him- noticed that they were jockeying for the seats of honor. It was the custom of that day to seat your dinner guests according to their wealth and status- highest status guests together, then lesser status guests together, and so on. No one wanted to be seated at the end of the status chart. You went up or down in people's eyes based on where you were seated. Rather like in the lunchroom in high school. Heaven forbid that you aren't seated with the cool kids. And remember the shame of trying to

¹ Tony Campolo, *Stories that Feed your Soul*. pg. 104-106

sit at the cool table only to be told, "Get outta here!" and having to take the only seat left at a table with kids you didn't even know.

So did Jesus give a dinner etiquette lesson here? You know- act humble and hope you get promoted to the cool seats? No, Jesus was calling us to examine our motives. Is our life motivated by a desire to get ahead or a desire to serve? To humble ourselves is to recognize that all we have is gift, it's not earned. When everything is gift, we can be content wherever we sit- whether it's 1st class or 3rd class. We won't look down on people who have less than us or are different from us. As though we deserve better than them. Those who humble themselves will be exalted, Jesus said - in God's eyes now, and one day at the resurrection. And isn't that what counts?

But Jesus goes further. Sometimes we're the host with the power and the wealth. The same humbleness is called for. Everything we have is gift. So don't just serve those who can return the favor or make us look good. Instead, serve those who can't, those who would be seated in the lowest seats at dinner if they are invited at all. Serve the lame, the disabled, the poor. They were the marginalized people of Jesus' day. Jesus invites us to be different and serve those who can't pay us back and serve them with our best.

While we lived in Dubuque, I helped at the UCC Church's dinner for the homeless that they provided every Thursday evening. Jesus would have loved their dinners. Lots of church people and organizations provided the food and did the dishes, and volunteers like me served the food. They had music playing in the background like a restaurant, tablecloths on the tables, and they used the same good dishes and silverware they used to serve themselves at their church dinners. The meal began by asking for prayer requests and then the pastor said grace and prayed prayer requests. After dinner, people could bring their containers to take the left overs home. Not only did they not pull down the shades, but nothing they did was done cheap or sloppy- they did for the poor as they did for themselves. Their motives were clear.

Sometimes it's tempting to pull the shades down to protect ourselves. When I was in Kenya on a mission trip, everything we were doing was good. Those kids living in poverty all learned how to brush their teeth and they got their tooth brushes and toothpaste, some for the first time ever. But it also felt like a mere drop in a huge bucket compared to all that was needed. It reminded me of the story of a little boy who found star fish stranded on the beach. He was throwing them one by one back into the ocean to save their lives. A man watched for a few minutes and then asked the boy, "What does all your effort matter? You can't save them all." And the boy replied, "It matters to this one," as he threw it into the water. What I did in Kenya didn't end poverty, but it did matter to the children I served, just as what Jesus did at that dinner didn't cure all disease but it did matter for the man with dropsy.

So what makes us want to pull the blinds down today? We have people all around us who need food and shelter, clothing, jobs, transportation, and health care, just like in Jesus' day. We face people asking for help on the street corners. It's tempting to keep looking straight ahead and not see. If you're like me, you feel guilty when you do, even though we know that giving money is not always the best response. So I give to the food bank instead and when a person with a sign is outside the grocery store, I buy a sandwich and water to give them as I leave. Whatever we choose to do with the noses pressed against the windows, I

believe Jesus is calling us to do it with the shades up high so we can really see the people through God's eyes. Don't turn away, don't pull the shades down.

Churches can be tempted to pull the shades down too. How? By designing activities that meet their own needs, but ignore the needs of others out there. Giving in to the temptation to be satisfied with being together with the people they enjoy rather than reaching out to invite the people who need to have their souls fed too. By refusing to welcome people they disagree with. To forget that we are Jesus' sent ones and pull the shades down.

Our nation can be tempted to not see too: there are millions of people in this country without health insurance and they go without routine health care that the rest of us take for granted. It's tempting to pull the shades down and continue to tell them to get a job with health insurance or do without. As we listen to Presidential candidates talk about their health care solutions, Jesus calls us to listen really seeing the people affected, not just our own needs. Which candidate plans invite us to pull the shades down so we can continue to enjoy our own health care in peace? Jesus reminds us that motives count.

What about the immigrants coming to our borders? When I hear our administration say that we only want immigrants who can pay their own way, already have insurance and a job waiting, I hear Jesus saying to invite the poor, lame, disabled, those who cannot pay us back. So what's the answer to the complicated immigration issues? Some people say build a wall and refuse or discourage those who come seeking help; others say spend the money to actually solve the problem that causes the people to come here in the first place. Jesus is calling us to evaluate what we hear and read and think by whether the solution offered is a way to pull the shades down and not see people's suffering, or is a way to really serve those in need. Jesus reminds us that motives count.

So what can you do, Community Church of Issaquah? The Outreach Committee has arranged for us to provide Christmas gifts to a family this holiday season. You will soon see a list of toys and clothing needs to brighten their holiday. I invite us to be like the UCC church in Dubuque- be as creative and generous as we would be if we put on a party for ourselves. It won't solve all poverty in Issaquah, but it will matter to this one family. And we can join in prayer that they will know the God who loves them because we didn't pull the shades down.

As a church of Jesus' sent ones, will you have the courage to look at what you're doing to see what it says about who you really care about? And if it doesn't say what you say you believe is important, what will you do about it? As you consider a new pastor, will you call someone who will keep things the same, or a pastor who will stretch you to try new ways of reaching others in Jesus' name? Will you work alongside your new pastor in whatever way you are able? Who is God calling you to serve in Jesus' name in this next part of your history?