



**Sermon for Sunday, September 2, 2007, 11:15 a.m.**

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 17**

**The Rev. Jonathan Eden**

Proverbs 25:6-7

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

When I first graduated from college, over eleven years ago now, I had a really hard year. Besides discovering that the world was not going to come to me on a silver platter, I was feeling lost and frustrated in my initial attempts to join the work force. I was living with a good friend and his family near Boston. They had generously let me live with them until I got settled. But I remember on the first day of my first job, my friend's dad said to me, "Remember John, a thousand 'at-a boy's!' equals a promotion, but one 'Oh no!' (and he actually used language that would be inappropriate for the pulpit, but you can use your imagination) means you start back at zero.

I know that he was just trying to give me a clever bit of wisdom as I headed off, but he actually left me feeling deflated. I thought, "Is this what life is about now? Scrambling after 'at-a boy's!'" Work didn't really improve things either, because that's what it felt like, like I was surrounded by people chasing after a little taste of praise, not out of a love or passion for their work, but simply to get ahead, to be the envy of their peers. This was all an education for me.

Well, as you may know, from week to week there are often options in the lectionary for which scripture gets read. This week there were actually three options for the Old Testament reading, and the reason we heard this one from Proverbs, this little nugget of wisdom, is that it got under my skin. It brought me back to that deflated, depressing Monday morning over a decade ago. It's essentially the same kind of advice. It tells us how the world supposedly works, and it gives us a hint. It tells us how to be clever enough, and suggests that if we navigate it well enough, our reward might just be for the king to deign to ask us to move up a chair or two, and if we're really lucky, it might just be in front of our friends when it happens. I thought, haven't we gotten anywhere in the three thousand or so years since that little scrap of supposedly prudent knowledge had been put to paper?

So, I wonder if you can imagine my dismay when I moved on to the gospel reading from Luke. There, Jesus is

using pretty much the same old tarnished piece of insight. "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." You would be back at zero.

I have to tell you, I really struggled with this verse. I couldn't seem to get around what Jesus seemed to be suggesting with this old proverb, but eventually I got over myself and I realized that Jesus is doing what makes him such a brilliant teacher. He is taking a proverb that all of the Pharisees there at the Sabbath dinner would have know, a proverb that seems to make some logical sense, and he puts it into a new context, turning it upside-down and radicalizing it. In the context of that Sabbath dinner, where Jesus was being closely watched by the Pharisees who he had so recently rebuked at least twice regarding healing on the Sabbath, this proverb about how to get ahead in the eyes of your supervisors, became a parable about the way we need to live and relate to God in the new world that was being prepared for us by Jesus. The Sabbath dinner was meant to be a foretaste of God's kingdom. But I think through their pride and their exclusivity, the dinner lost that meaning for the Pharisees. So by telling this story here, by saying when you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit in the place of honor, it changed from being an earthly story of advancement to a parable about living in response to a God that is, as Desmond Tutu once said, a prodigal God, a God that pours out blessings upon us in a way that is more generous than we could ever hope for or expect. And Jesus is pretty clear here that part of that response, particularly for those with means, for those in positions of power and authority, needs to be truly living in humility and extending the banquet to those who feel they cannot partake. At the end of this gospel passage, Jesus exhorts us to invite those who, in that

society, would have been outcast and marginalized, and certainly could have never repaid us in this life.

In the end though, these words are about more than simply telling us how to live. They are about redefining the world as it was known. In Jesus' presence, the Sabbath is fulfilled, the kingdom is at hand, and because of that, nothing would ever be the same. Yet, it is the same as it ever was. And that is the hard part about being people of faith, isn't it? We live in a world that was turned upside-down, where God's promises are fulfilled. Yet all too often, we also live in a world that pulls us into that hopeless cycle of angling for whatever it is that will bring us a moment of pride.

So I think that Jesus leaves us with a profound responsibility here. And while a big part of that is living in a way that is to the benefit of others, rather than ourselves, it's more than that. He charges us with shaping and forming this new creation. There's a Christian ethicist named Stanley Hauerwas who writes, "Christians must serve the world on their own terms. Otherwise, the world would have no means to know itself as the world." I think he's suggesting that living as a church, as a Christian community in the world, is about more than just letting the world know who you are. Because if what we believe is true, if there is truth in Jesus' words here, then the world is a hopeless place without us. That God has asked us to listen for his call, and Christ has asked us to engage in his words here, and if we are at least willing to do that, then there will always be, and finally be, hope.

*Amen.*