

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost
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I want you imagine a Venn diagram. You know, the kind with two circles that intersect. I want you to imagine in one circle the very human tendency to be socially stratified and competitive. We can symbolize this with the image of a monkey, since we get this trait from our evolutionary past. In the other circle, imagine the Kingdom of God as symbolized by a feast. Imagine that these two circles come together. What might be in that space where the two circles intersect? Where do human beings and the Kingdom of God intersect?

Now let's step back just a moment and look closer at the two circles, the two spheres of our Christian lives. In the monkey-circle, we can list all kinds of things from our baser natures. We are violent when threatened. We seek power and are violent when that power is threatened. We seek elevated social status, and we'll justify just about anything to get it. We are tempted by desires of the flesh, as Paul might define "flesh." We are fearful not so much of lacking things but of others having more than we do. And we become irrational when those lower in social status than ourselves have the same things we do. There's actual scientific evidence for these things across all of human-kind. I'm not just making them up.

These are all natural human behaviors. Every human on earth is tempted to behave this way. It's part of our biology. There's no use denying it. The only thing that comes from denial is delusion, and plenty of evils come out of delusion.

But that doesn't mean these natural, base natures of ours can't be overcome. They can be acknowledged, addressed, and changed. That process of moving from our baser natures to an adult human being is also part of our common humanity. Otherwise, we would still be swinging from the trees and knocking each other on the heads with rocks.

Humans all over the planet and for at least 100,000 thousand years have gotten really good at learning how to behave well among our own group and to support our own group, which can be a team or tribe or society. We're not so good at dealing with other groups, tribes, and societies, but that's different sermon.

It would be really easy to stop the sermon right here and say that what Jesus is doing in our reading from Luke today is telling the people he's having dinner with that they should do a better job at being decent adult human beings who support society in ways that rise above our baser natures. But that would just leave the monkey-circle in the Venn diagram. And that's not what Jesus is trying to say.

Let's look at the other circle, then. The Kingdom of God circle symbolized by the feast. What does that feast look like in your imagination? [...] I have several images in my mind. First, I imagine the classic Medieval feast with the fat king swinging a leg of mutton around while guzzling wine from an enormous jeweled chalice while the elite are seated by strict social status around him and the emaciated beggars and dogs and serving people flit around here and there in the background. But I have another image in my mind. I imagine a potlatch and a luau and other ancient practices of our ancestors where the hosts gain honor by giving away to everyone the riches of the feast. Where all are fed, and all are honored by the social leveling.

It's easy to see how God might prefer this second image. Not only because this is how God loves us, but also because this is how humans operate at our best human-ness. There are all kinds of research now supporting this idea. The societies that ensure the least and lowest have their basic needs met, the societies that invest in girls and women in terms of education and business loans, the societies where the richest willingly give more out of their wealth to

support their societies... these societies are more healthy on any scale you choose to measure them by except maybe Gross Domestic Product.

I'd like to imagine Jesus asking the Pharisees at this dinner to consider what their intentions are for their gatherings, for their feast. Is it to feed and solidify their elite status in their social structure and keep the poor poorer? Or is it to feed and solidify the people of Israel, the chosen people of God, by sacrificing a bit of wealth and gaining social status in that way? Which feast would God approve of? Where is God in the feast?

I'm going to a feast this evening. The feast will celebrate a marriage and those invited were invited out of love for this couple. No one has worried about the social status of those invited. If someone from outside were to stumble in and join the party, I'm pretty sure the happy couple would be happy to add one more to the party. These are not church-going people. But I'm pretty sure that the feast would come close to meeting with the approval of Jesus. I'm pretty sure God will be in this feast. This feast will love others as God loves us, whether or not there's a priest present or a prayer is said publicly.

What about this feast? This feast we celebrate every Sunday? I look around and I see a community of Christ where some of us who've been through life's worst events are right front and center in the places of honor. That's a beautiful thing. That's not to say we can't do better. We can do better in a million ways, but let's recognize how well we honor our diversity in this community. How well we love each other, no matter where we've come from or what we've been through.

What about our denomination? How does the Worldwide Anglican Communion celebrate the feast? Are there any who are not invited to every level of the organizational structure? Is the wealth hoarded at the top of the hierarchy? Are the poor among us getting poorer and left out in the cold?

What about the Church in the world. The Christians who confess Christ as lord and savior all over the planet? How are we celebrating the feast? Are we keeping what's good to ourselves? Are we not letting some people in? Does the love of Christ get shared with everyone? If we can't answer those questions, do we think our ignorance will absolve us of our responsibility to answer those questions?

God love us all. If we confess our sins and repent, God forgives us all. God took everything he valued most and gave it to us to do with what we would. This life of ours is God's feast. Not just what we do on Sundays. All that we have, our love, our bodies, our lives, our belongings, our time, our attention... it was all given to us by God through Christ out of love. Hoarding it will do us no good.

Jesus is in the middle of the Venn diagram. So are you, as Christ's own forever. Very human and very redeemed.

I want to celebrate a feast Jesus would be proud of with my life. I want to celebrate a feast Jesus would be proud of with you. I want us all to live this feast and celebrate every hour of every day. I want you to join me in this feast. It will only cost you everything.

Amen.