

“The Tug On The Line”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

“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.

But 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He 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.

But when you give a banquet,

invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you,

for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

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I.

I LOVE to fish. There I said it. Owing to having to devote just about every free moment over the past few years to working on the She Shack, however, I had forgotten just *how* much I love it. This summer, though, it all came back to me and now it calls to me just about every day.

While the She Shack isn't *done*, late last spring I reached something of break point after having completed the wiring and insulation. The next step is sheetrock, and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to tackle that until I had a good chunk of free time in the early fall. So, I spent July and August doing all the things I had to put on the back-burner owing to the Shack: mostly painting, staining, general repair and upkeep, as well as a few small shop projects. I've also read about 15 books, got a heck of a tan, did a fair amount of floating in an inner tube, and found my fanny back to my fishing boat.

II.

Fishing means different things to different people. To some it the finest of sports, to others it can be big business, a casual past-time, merely an excuse not to be doing some things or engage in other things, a fond memory of what once was, or the biggest waste of time ever (second only to golf).

For me, I enjoy the science of fishing, I appreciate the restorative nature of just being on the water while most folks are still sleeping, or wetting a line while watching the sunset. I will further confess to taking neither a small or secret amount of pride in being THE guy on the lake who knows all the "spots." Fishing is also the perfect compliment to my obsessive nature, to which my 19 fishing poles and steamer trunk-sized tackle box will surely attest. Beyond any of that, however, what I value *most* about fishing is the *theology* of it (this is where you all groan and say, "Ok, here we go.").

III.

While today's scripture reading from Luke chapter 14 can certainly be understood as a call to humility (and it is) I think the more interesting question it raises is what might cause and encourage us, as people of faith in specific, to pursue humility as a *methodology* (as my dog-musher friend, Arleigh Jorgenson, once said to me 30 some years ago). Jesus says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." That is, the way to being exalted, the method we must use, is humility. Humility is the wheels upon which we travel the journey of faith. Which, for many, is counter-intuitive; if you want to head west, you don't hitch up the horse and wagon and then point it to the east.

IV.

The context of today's passage is a bit of a head-scratcher. Jesus, it seems, has been invited to share the Sabbath meal at the home and table of a Pharisee. How and why this came to be is curious, though it seems evident that at least in some part the Pharisee wanted to get a first-hand and up-close look at this Jesus everyone was talking about.

Upon arrival, Jesus observes the other guests shuffling for the seats of honor. Not necessarily need to poke anyone in the eye but still wishing to use the situation to make an important point, our ever-clever Jesus decides to regale everyone with a parable of a wedding banquet in order to teach a lesson about not assuming a place of prestige and run the risk of being re-seated when a more important guest comes along. Instead, just be thankful for a seat at the table and await the host to invite you to "move up higher."

V.

Never one to leave well enough alone, Jesus then goes on to leverage the parable against the presumption that as God's chosen people the Israelites would *always* be invited to the banquet, and that the best seats will be reserved for the most pious among them; i.e., the religious leaders like the Pharisee to whose home Jesus had been invited. Turning his attention directly to his host, Jesus admonishes him about extending hospitality to friends, relatives or rich neighbors solely in the hope of, someday, receiving a reciprocal invitation from them.

Rather, Jesus says, when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind because you will be blessed; not because *they* will necessarily repay you, but you will *eventually* be repaid at what Jesus terms “the resurrection of the righteous.” Though covered in a bubble wrap of blessing, this is really the same motivational stick which has always been employed to prod the faithful: the promise of some delayed, but assured, future gratification.

VI.

Sadly, most of what the world knows of religion is primarily having to do with the stick, whatever stick that maybe: either the hard hickory of fire and brimstone administered out behind the woodshed, or the kind found in today’s passage which softens the blow with blessing. Either way, though, it is still the same old stick. Sadder still, is how many who come into the church seeking shelter from the world persist in celebrating the stick, and yearn for others to feel the stick’s same sting.

Now, I’m not saying the stick isn’t real, or that we should in anyway ignore it, but I’ll forsake negative reinforcement of the stick any day of the week for a lure of a fat, juicy carrot. Not only is the carrot a far more effective motivator, the greater truth is that the carrot is also a whole lot of fun. After almost 30 years of parish ministry, I can say for certain that many churches have simply forgotten how to have fun. Which is where theology of fishing comes into play.

VII.

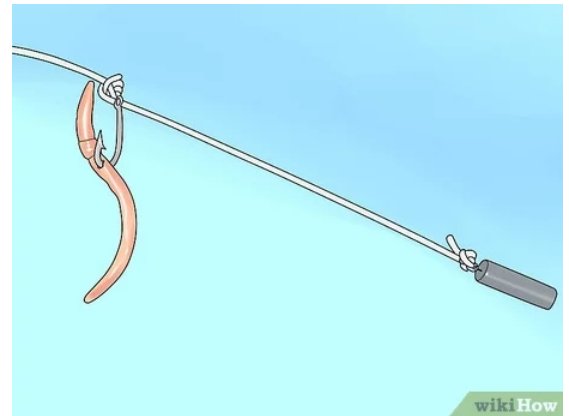
I began today’s sermon by telling you that I *love* to fish. Now I want to tell you *why* I love to fish. Ready? It is *the tug on the line* that gets me. As my vast array of fishing rods and impressive tackle box would indicate, there are countless ways to catch fish. There is the nibble then bite on a baited hook, the hit on a lure being retrieved or trolled, and the sudden violent strike reserved for a top water lure as it skims the surface. While each of these are fun in their own way, they are sudden and a bit out of the blue. Not unlike a burning bush experience. You go from absolutely nothing to a whole lot of something in very short order, and there really isn’t a whole lot of time to think about it, let alone savor it.

Then there is the tug at the end of the line which results from a certain technique called “Drop Shot Fishing.” I’ve been fishing for a long time, but

last year my son, Tucker, the 2nd best fisherman on Trout Lake (much to his chagrin) turned me on to Drop Shot Fishing. Now, it is either all I do, or mostly what I do.

VIII.

At the risk of boring you with too many details, in order to appreciate the point I'm making here in the conclusion of today's sermon you'll need to understand the technique. Picture the end of some fishing line. At the very bottom is tied a special kind of weight called a Drop Shot sinker. About 12 to 18 inches above the sinker is a hook tied with a particular kind of knot which makes the hook stick out perpendicular to the line. On the hook is some kind of dangly plastic worm or minnow. You cast this out some distance away from you and allow the weight to fall down and rest on the bottom. Now, you tighten up the line until just taut to form an angle down into the water with the baited hook suspended (or presented, if you will) a foot or so off the bottom; then, wait with patience and abide a reasonable expectation of hope. If the fish are there and the "bite" is on, pretty soon the rod tip will dip and bounce, you'll feel the unmistakable and unforgettable "tug" at the other end of the line which is the exaltation every fisherman hopes to find.



IX.

In that moment, you and your world will change as you savor a tasty mouthful of carrot. Truth be told, whether or not you eventually catch the fish is beside the point (though, that is certainly a bonus). Instead, just knowing that there is *something* down there, that you have its attention and, now, that you are directly connected to it for even some small span of time is what matters most.

By way of *theological* analogy, either we can spend our lives being driven by the stick of some future punishment or reward, or we can live our lives in such away as to feel as if we have the potential of nibbling on the carrot in the possibility which each new moment presents to us. That we believe God is out there, that we have God's attention, and that we are directly connected to God in some way, shape or form; that we feel the tug of God at the other end of the line.

X.

By way of *scriptural* analogy to today's passage, if you don't believe there is a host out there who might say to you, at some point, "move up higher," well then *of course* you are going to scratch and claw all your life to claim whatever seat of honor you can manage for yourself at the time. While there are a multitude of ways to pursue a religious and spiritual life, akin to the seemingly infinite number of ways to catch a fish, it seems to me that in today's scripture reading Jesus is advocating for a simple methodology of humility as the most favored technique: fishing just off the bottom.

Nothing fancy, just a simple sinker and hook well placed with just enough tension brought to bear such that, when the spiritual "bite" is on, we can feel the exalting tug of God at the other end of our faith. And that, my friends, is nothing *but* fun. Let us remember in our lives and in our church, how much fun it can be to simply love God with all our heart, soul and minds. Hopefully, today, it will all come back to you and, beginning with tomorrow, call to you just about every new day. Amen.