

Seminary of the Southwest
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Tuesday, October 5, 2021
John Hines Day, Luke 14:1-14

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning, Seminary of the Southwest!

Grace and Peace and greetings to you from your friends in Christ at Trinity Church in the City of Boston. With thanks to Dean Kittredge, Bishop Ryan, and Clarke Heidrick, our Board's Executive Chair, I am honored to be with you todayⁱ on this campus that I love, in the seminary community that formed – and continues to form – me as a priest and a person.ⁱⁱ

As some will know, my family and I moved from here in Austin to Boston during the summer of 2019. Candidly, the transition to Trinity and to New England – which began just seven months before the pandemic – has been challenging for my teenaged children, for my wife, and for me. Among other difficulties, we pine for Mi Madre's salsa ... Dirty Martin's onion rings ... Waterloo Records 20%-off sales ... and we remain unconvinced about the local icons of our new geography. For one: Tom Brady. I mean, last Sunday night's adorationsⁱⁱⁱ were a major Barf-O-Rama.^{iv} Give me The Tyler Rose, Earl Campbell, any day. And – man! – so, too, these Wahlbergs: they are *everywhere* up in The Massachusetts: in the movies, on “reality” programs flipping their burgers, and schilling for all manner of Boston business.

When I think of Marky Mark, I still picture him as the musclebound frontman of “The Funky Bunch,” awkwardly encouraging his listeners to “feel the vibrations.”^v [so bad!]

During those halcyon days of hair metal and New Jack Swing, MTV annually hosted “Rock-And-Jock” softball and basketball games. Anticipating social media's cringe culture, these “sporting” events were purposefully painful to watch: MC Lyte and Richard Marx attempting to play outfield; Kip Winger and Pamela Anderson endeavoring free throws.^{vi} Mostly, the performers knew the score, and, based on the in-game interviews, wisely chose to start the after-party *before* the games began ... notably, however, not so, Mark Wahlberg.

[Now, put a pin in that cliffhanger – which will become our sermon illustration – and let's turn to the Gospel ... this is a transition]

Chapter fourteen of Luke opens, “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”^{vii} ... *they were watching him closely.*”

Like the after-supper scene three chapters earlier – “when the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward [Jesus; began] to cross-examine him about many things[; and *began to lie*] in wait for him,” Luke observes^{viii} – everything about *this* supper is a setup. The day of the week, the house, and the company have all been purposefully aligned, and everyone present is in on the grift that has Jesus as its mark. The conspiracy begins with the Pharisees arranging for a sick man to bump into Jesus.^{ix} This “chance” encounter presents the teacher with impossible options, either: heal on the Sabbath and offend the narrowest reading of Jewish Law ... or ignore the suffering and offend the confidence of those who follow him.

And, be clear, the stakes are high: Exodus 31 prescribes, “... the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath shall be put to death[; and whoever profanes it shall be cut off from among the people.]”^x Realize, the Pharisees do not seek simply to marginalize Jesus, they aim to eliminate him and his threat to their standing.

Yet, no matter the peril, Jesus will act according to what Love commands, and not what either comfort or convenience might prefer. He steers directly into their scheme, asking aloud the very question concocted by their contrivance: “Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?”^{xi} – “*or not,*” phraseology returning a dare for a dare.

While the Pharisees feign boldness behind Jesus’ back, the Gospel reports that in response to this challenge, “[The Pharisees] were silent. So Jesus took the [suffering man,] healed him, and [set him free]. Then [Jesus says] to the [Pharisees,] ‘If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well, will you not immediately pull [them out, even if] on a sabbath day?’ And[, again, to this the Pharisees] could not reply.”^{xii}

Following this exchange, the dinner party begins, and the next trap awaits: *where will Jesus sit?* In a status-obsessed culture, the place Jesus chooses will witness either his *presumption*, setting himself up for the embarrassment of his looming, haughty host tapping him on the shoulder and (literally) putting him in his proper place; or will signal his *acquiescence*, assuming the lowest seat by his own accord and, thereby, empowering the Pharisees to tout *his* recognition of *their* authority. In either case, they’ve effectively cornered Jesus, where any resistance he offers will cast him as small and insecure.

As with the healing, Jesus steers directly into their subterfuge. Pausing before he takes his seat, he begins to teach with a parable. He says to all those gathered: “... when you are invited [to a wedding banquet], go and sit down at the lowest place ... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”^{xiii}

See, peering beneath the surface of the Pharisees’ privilege, Jesus sees their insecurities – sees both their mortal fear of feeling embarrassed, of feeling ashamed; and sees, too, their aching for affirmation: “Friend, come up higher,” they so long to hear.^{xiv} Packaging claims about his identity in Emily Post-style counsel, this teaching moment distinguishes his authority from that of the conspirators: while the Pharisees use their power to maintain an elevated position, Jesus exercises his authority to challenge the very *idea* of worldly hierarchy, that underpinning of *every* position. Subtly establishing himself as the Pharisees’ equal, Jesus undermines not only their rouse, but their entire social order.

In the two-volume commentary on the Gospel of Luke published just this year, Shelly Matthews and Barbara E. Reid note that “reversal of status” – as in, *those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted* – “is a theme that resounds throughout the Gospel[, yet] does not result in equity.”^{xv} Inverting “unequal power structures,” leaves the structure in place and “only changes the characters[‘ roles].”^{xvi} Drawing on the arguments of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, they continue:

to arrive at a community of equal disciples, where all have an equitable place at the table, strategies of empowerment are needed to raise up those at the bottom of domination systems, while relinquishment of power, privilege, and status is incumbent on those at the top. It is important, then, to be cognizant of one’s [own] social location before taking to heart Jesus’s admonitions to take the last place and to humble oneself. In [this parable,] Jesus [addresses] guests of a prominent Pharisee who are socially well positioned. They can afford to take a humble place; not so for those who are customarily humiliated.^{xvii}

See, depending upon *our* location – whether we are the powerful or the marginalized ... whether we are the temple leadership or Jesus’ discipled rabble ... whether, in the language of anti-racism, we grapple our Internalized Racial Superiority or our Internalized Racial Oppression ... this Gospel drama reaches to us *where we are*; points us to our varied, immediate tasks; yet, also makes clear that all of us have work to do – *all of us have work to do!* – as part of our shared vocation in service of God’s reign.

Following his address of *everyone* present at the supper party, Jesus’ pointedly pivots to “the one who had invited him” and challenges the domination system’s self-serving order: “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 – because they cannot repay you ...*”^{xviii}

[Okay: here’s the walkaway kernel, that repeatable summary of the sermon:]

Jesus relocates “blessing” from the promise of worldly return, to the act of companioning itself. Again: Jesus relocates blessing from the returns of a social economy based on transactional relationships – where even generosity can be leveraged for self-satisfying ends^{xix} – *to the act of companioning itself*. Not what you can do for me, or what I can do for you – not even what we can accomplish together, a more Christian social market commodifying God’s blessing, yet still mirroring the domination system’s principles. No. Jesus inaugurates *an entirely new order*, one based in mutuality, cooperation, and Love.

Marky Mark ...

[We return to our sermon illustration: in this text, applied as a wrapper (and, given the illustration, note that’s “w-rapper,” not “r-apper”).]

Bless his heart, Marky Mark wanted so much to prove he could play basketball. With his flat-brimmed ballcap turned sideways, at the Rock-and-Jock games he ran while others jogged, stole the ball while others stood helpless and confused, and shot while others passed. And, joining that long procession of actors and pop stars who wanted to be athletes – and the equally long line of sports stars who wanted to act and sing^{xx} – Marky Mark proved a terrible, terrible basketball player, his myopic intensity only exaggerating his cringe-inducing mis-fit-ness.

Likewise, *bless our Episcopal hearts*. From Austin to Boston and back again, all we in the mainline, denominational Church who want so much to prove our progressiveness,^{xxi} to prove our relevance,^{xxii} our consequence.^{xxiii} We who, with myopic intensity, choose to prioritize the prophecies and tongues of *one* season, to the subordination of the Love that gives rise to *every* season.^{xxiv} With carefully curated courage, we prove brave enough only to recast the characters of the domination system, rather than to join in the new order Jesus inaugurated. As prophets of a partisan Gospel, we bless a single perspective of our temporal situation as inviolate – as though its achievement will bring God’s blessing – creating, mobilizing, and commissioning zealots as civic antagonists rather than as Beloved reconcilers. Instead of offering one another Love, we grant ourselves permission to judge, to scorn, and to dismiss any who dare disagree with us, our selfish pride blinding us from recognizing our kinship in fanaticism with the very conspirators we claim to oppose.

People of God, we as the Church must recognize our vocation and trust in its sufficiency, trust in the power of our companionship *where God’s blessing resides!* In Belovedness, and for Belovedness, Jesus calls us to bear God’s blessing – to be God’s blessing! – and join in the more equitable, more loving, more just union Jesus has already inaugurated.

Feel the vibrations.

In the name of God,
Amen.

ⁱ I receive an invitation to preach “on the road” as an honor, and I enjoy its challenge. The task asks for a fresh word – not just reheating a prior Sunday’s leftovers (a congregation can usually taste the freezer burn!) – while sharing, as well, some of what the home parish has been hearing, praying, and hoping. In this sermon, I brought the heart of a text I preached at a service organized by our Anti-Racism Team (ART), themed “Praying for Our American Life: Now and in the World to Come.” I coordinated for today’s Gospel lesson to be the same as the one Trinity’s ART had chosen for its service.

ⁱⁱ I decided to omit the concluding recollection, “and in the chapel that I did not frequent as often as I should have during my three years as a student.” In a story that Dean Kittredge does not treasure my retelling, I once bumped into Will Spong in the breezeway outside the library during what, in those days, would have been the Tuesday Lutheran chapel service. Will stopped me: “Morgan,” he began, his tone aimed in a question, before resolving into the matter-of-fact-ness of a statement, “you don’t always attend chapel, do you.” I replied honestly, “No, sir, I do not.” Pulling on his beard, he said, “Well, neither do I. And I think that’s fine.”

ⁱⁱⁱ I mean, did Lester Holt really need to broadcast the dadgum Friday evening news from Gillette Stadium?

^{iv} [Barf-O-Rama](#): “Slowly, a sound started to build in [his] stomach, a strange and scary sound like a log truck coming at you at a hundred miles-an-hour.”

^v Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch. “Good Vibrations” *Music For The People*. Interscope. 1991. Someone should write a paper on the role of race in Boston’s Marky Mark and his brother Donnie’s New Kids on the Block as successors to New Edition and its alums, Bobby Brown, Johnny Gill, Ralph Tresvant, and Bell Biv Devoe.

^{vi} Please consider these pairings emblematic, rather than historically accurate!

^{vii} Luke 14:1.

^{viii} Luke 11:53-54.

^{ix} Probably swelling of the ankles and feet, symptoms that contemporary doctors might identify as indicative of congestive heart failure. From Matthews and Reid: “The specific malady is not accidental to the story. A person suffering from dropsy has unquenchable thirst, leading Greek philosophers to use dropsy as a metaphor for greed and excessive wealth. The man with dropsy is a visual symbol of the illness that afflicts a person with an insatiable desire for honor, status, and wealth, a sickness that can lead to their exclusion from the final banquet” (420).

^x Exodus 31:14-15.

^{xi} Luke 14:3.

^{xii} Luke 14:4-6.

^{xiii} Luke 14:10-11.

^{xiv} Luke 14:10.

^{xv} Matthews, Shelly and Barbara E. Reid. *Luke 10-24*, Wisdom Commentary Volume 43B, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2021. 422.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} *Ibid*, 422-423.

^{xviii} Luke 14:12a, 13-14.

^{xix} Luke 14:12b. Jesus knows the score: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brother or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.”

^{xx} ... maybe you own the recording debut of former LSU great, Shaquille O’Neal, [Shaq Diesel](#), or [the stylings of former Cy Young award-winner, Barry Zito](#).

^{xxi} ... and distinguish ourselves from our hyper-conservative neighbors who command the media’s attention;

^{xxii} ... in an increasingly secular society;

^{xxiii} ... that one’s “being Christian” makes a difference in the state of cosmos.

^{xxiv} To begin Trinity’s Program Year, I preached a three-week sermon series on 1 Corinthians 13. Some of this passage picks up lines and ideas from the last of these, entitled, “[The Promise of Love](#).”