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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/28/2016, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost,  
Lectionary 22  
Proverbs 25:6-7, Luke 14:1, 7-14  
Do Thyself No Harm

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is about humility as the rational way of life for the Christian. Christians are not fools. We just operate according to a different sense of reality – a sense of reality in which love is really important. Let us begin with our Gospel Lesson. This is from Luke 14. Our Lord says that for those who believe in heaven, it is intelligent for us to be kind to the poor and to those who cannot repay us. Jesus says this:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup>and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.  
(Luke 14:12-14, RSV)

I read recently that the old, repentant, slave-trader John Newton was very much taken with this particular text. He feared that our Lord's teaching here is not taken seriously enough by Christians. He felt that too many of us skip over this teaching. We hear it, but do not take it to heart, nor do we arrange our lives in accordance with it. Newton wrote to one of his wealthy correspondents about this. He pulled no punches. He argues from prudence, from good sense. His uncompromising words go this way:

Let your friends who are in good circumstances be plainly told, that, though you love them, *prudence* . . . will not permit you to entertain them, no, not for a night. What! Say you, shut my door against my friends? Yes, by all means, rather than against Christ . . . [who] says of the poor, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me. . . ." The poor need relief. One would almost think that the passage [in] Luke 14:12–14 was not considered as a part of God's word; at least I believe there is no one passage so generally neglected by his own people. (Newton 1995: 1.136)

That's *our* passage: Luke 14:12-14. John Newton, I bet you know, is the former English slave-trader who repented and wrote the hymn so many of us love: *Amazing Grace*. John Newton knew something about the wondrous *humility* of God who showed himself willing to invite even the lowest and meanest of us to his Table — indeed to that heavenly banquet in which Jesus looks each of us straight in the eyes and speaks of his body and his blood given for us for the forgiveness of our sins. John Newton was inspired by this great divine humility and so, in his letter to his prosperous correspondent, he urged him to imitate that divine humility by entertaining the poor.

My theme so far is that humility is a rational way of life for a Christian. But I think I can enlarge that theme to say this: We cannot be *intelligent* without also being *good*. And if we are not good, then we do ourselves harm. But do thyself no harm! For a Christian, kindness toward others is the safest path. It is safest both in this world and in the next. Failing to walk with Jesus in the end is unreasonable. It amounts to knocking our head up against the wall. Taking up our cross and following Jesus is not easy, but it is helpful for our neighbors and it is an intelligent way of life for us too.

So, John Newton spoke of the prudence of hospitality to the poor. Let me give another example. This one concerns courage. My theme is the same: It is prudent to be good. As it is intelligent to invite the poor to our feasts, so it is intelligent for us to be brave.

Back in college days I was struck by a passing line in a book on moral philosophy. I have remembered this line through the years, and I have probably quoted it to you before. To be thorough, I went to the great New York Public Library this past week to look up that book and confirm that I had remembered the line correctly. Glad to say, I did remember it right. It goes this way:

He who has conquered fear has learnt not to let fear, should  
he feel it, *do him harm*.<sup>1</sup>

Now, the thing that struck me about this line so long ago, was the way the line concludes. Maybe you were a little surprised by the ending too. I would have thought that the line would go this way:

He who has conquered fear has learnt not to let fear, should  
he feel it, *stop him from doing the right thing*.

And that would be an honorable idea. The brave person is not the one who feels no fear, but rather the one who, if he should feel fear, if she should feel fear,

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1963), page 148)

nonetheless goes ahead and strives for justice. The brave person does the good thing even if his heart is trembling inside, even if her heart is trembling inside.

So, this is true, but it is not the way the writer put the matter. He put the matter in terms of self-interest. He said that the brave person is the one who, even if he should feel fear, does not let that fear “do him harm.” I was intrigued by that formulation way back then. It seemed to carry a whole new world within it, though I could not be very articulate about it back then.

Let me try my hand at explaining why I like that line. Let me reflect on it a bit, not as a young college student, but as an old pastor.

“Do thyself no harm,” cried out Saint Paul to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:28). You remember the story, I bet. Paul and Silas have been hurled into the deepest part of the prison in Philippi. Their feet have been made fast in the stocks. It is midnight, when you would have thought that all prisoners would be asleep, if not from exhaustion, then as a kind of welcome release from the miseries of their imprisonment. But Paul and Silas are not asleep. Instead, they are praying and singing hymns to God. Their stocks lock down their legs, but their hearts soar to God. The other prisoners are listening. Then an earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison and all the doors are opened and every prisoner’s bonds are loosed. The poor jailer despairs and prepares to kill himself. He figures he might as well do the deed himself, before his superiors do it for him. But Paul cries out to the man, “Do thyself no harm.” He reassures the jailer that no one has escaped. They are all here in prison. Paul and Silas win a soul that evening. The jailer and his household were baptized into Jesus Christ that same day.

There is nothing unChristian, I say, about that appeal, Do thyself no harm! John Newton makes the same appeal when talking about hospitality:

Let your friends who are in good circumstances be plainly told, that, though you love them, *prudence* . . . will not permit you to entertain them, no, not for a night.

Prudence, good judgment, having enough sense to come in out of the rain — prudence will not permit John Newton to neglect the poor. He could just have well cried out to his rich correspondent, “You harm yourself by entertaining your well-off friends and neglecting the poor.”

In fact, Jesus uses a similar line of reasoning in his Sermon on the Mount — in his teaching about the practice of piety:

<sup>1</sup>Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. . . .<sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; *and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* (Matthew 6:1-4, NRSV)

Likewise, in today's Gospel Lesson — the case of banquets and invitations to feasts — Jesus says that it is precisely because the poor *cannot* repay you that you will do better in eternity:

<sup>13</sup>But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup>and you will be blessed, because they *cannot* repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:13-14, RSV)

Why would we trade the bubbles and dreams and passing fancies of earthly life for the blessings of heaven? Why shortchange ourselves so?

In this way, Jesus asks us to be mindful of eternity. Do not exchange a handful of beans for the company of the angels. Remember the divine dimension to your life. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). Be sensible people.

“Enter by the narrow gate,” says Jesus. Why the narrow gate? Why the manner of life that requires some struggle, some discipline, some virtue, some kindness, some honesty in following Jesus? Why that narrow gate? Because that is the gate that does you no harm:

<sup>13</sup>Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14, RSV)

Jesus is always urging us in the direction of “abundant life” (John 10:10). Even in this present world, he would spare us from the vice, sin, discourtesy, and meanness that bring us so much trouble on earth and threaten us with misery in heaven:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

The reason it is sensible and prudent to invite the poor to our feast is because of the nature of God, which means the nature of reality, the nature of the universe. The true God loves the *unlovely*. Indeed, his love is their best chance to become lovely. God loves us *before* we love him. God loves us “while we are yet sinners” (Romans 5:8). Reality tilts toward the poor, the awkward, the guilty, those on the edge of things, those who *cannot* repay. It is as Luther said with his dying pen strokes: We are all beggars! So welcome the beggar. Do yourself no harm by neglecting the beggar, for if you neglect that poor person, you testify to your God that you yourself are willing to be neglected, for you too are a beggar.

Back in the days when the old prophet Samuel was surveying the sons of Jesse and searching for the new King of Israel, the LORD instructed Samuel to pay no attention to the beauty or the height of the various young men who stood before him. The LORD put the point this way:

Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7, RSV)

Well, the gospel is that when the LORD looks upon the heart, even of the poorest and lowest of us, he seems to see something utterly precious in his eyes. He counts even the most fragile and sinful of us as being worth dying for and worthy of being invited to his Table.

So, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus asks us to learn a new conception of reality — a new notion of things according to which the unlovely count! Glad to say, for that means that you and I count too, in the eyes of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.