

SAYINGS OF JESUS
TAKE THE LOW SEAT

Text on Sunday, September 12, 2010

Luke 14: 1-11

If you have studied the Old Testament with me, a hand swooping through the air like this, down and up and down, may bring to mind the whole arc of ancient Israel's story. Lofty pinnacles of holiness, faithfulness, and integrity. Grievous catastrophes—slavery, civil war, exile. And they are connected—not just by the flow of time, but causally, tragically. It is as if the loose gravel of ignorance and self-regard was already underfoot at each pinnacle. There we lost our footing and fell crashing to ruin, says Israel through the books. Yet in the severity of calamity, behold, a faith-filled new hearing for the will of the Eternal, first in one, then in a few who attend to the one, then, sometimes, the whole people is born anew.

You might call this the Bible's exaltation/humiliation cycle. Moments ago, with the help of the Apostles Creed, we told it again as short as it can be said. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit—*by the power of the Most High*, writes Luke—born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; descended into hell; on the third day, rose, and ascended to heaven . . .” Humiliation. Exaltation. Every story about Jesus has this germ waiting within the seed case.

You know this story. On the first day of an Old Testament class, as this pattern takes shape on the blackboard filling with Bible stories and names students remember, I ask them what it reminds them of. Always, someone says— even an eighteen year-old will say: *My life*. Yes. *Our life*. Dante set it down: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / che la diritta via era smarrita*. The first lines of *Inferno*: “In the middle of the road of *our life*, I found myself in a dark wood, in which the straight way was lost.” Such is the road of “our life.”

But what are we saying? That life has its ups and downs, so cheer up, something good will come along? Why come to church to hear sayings of that sort? Our whole culture exudes them. May God's word dive us deeper. The basic error in our ordinary attitude to our life is the assumption that we know bad from good, blessings from curses, and that we therefore must flee the fire of the bad and pursue the pleasure of the good. But it is not bad things themselves that degrade our life. Rather, it is the assumption that we must get out of them and on toward our happy destination. *That* drives most of our suffering. That is the word of our Lord. And of other Lords, too.

The Buddha said this of suffering: “Birth is suffering. Decay and death is suffering. Presence of objects we hate is suffering. Separation from objects we love is suffering. Not to obtain what we desire is suffering.” That is the first of what are known as the Four Noble Truths. The Enlightened One saw that it is our *attachment* to our life the way we want it that causes us to suffer. He called this attachment greed (*tanha*). He said our greed thrives in ignorance. What is our ignorance? Failing to understand that our misery is driven by a greed to get what we want and avoid what we fear. The Buddha called our life *samsara*—the continual flow of births and deaths. *Cheer up, something good will come along?* That is our ignorance.

Now come on, preacher, can't you lighten up? Can't you see that this is Homecoming Day, and we have guests, and babies? Why bring us down? Well, I don't intend to bring you down, but let us acknowledge that we have been brought down. And *Cheer up!* doesn't work. *Go shopping!* doesn't work. Nine years ago now, I was underway with a series of sermons, each based in one oracle from each prophet who spoke to Israel's awful exile, whether in warning or in comfort. A reading from Ezra for the Sunday following September 11, 2001 was set long in advance. It describes how, on return from

exile, the people set about to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, which was demolished decades before by invaders.

Well, we did not read that story that Sunday; by no means was it time to speak of rebuilding the ruins of a nation. Instead, we spoke of the laid-down life; of the victims of the atrocity, to be sure; but especially of those who *chose* to lay down their lives. Of the fire fighters and police and of that decision that came for some men in the cabin of a jet over Pennsylvania, the moment they ceased from all imagination of a good future, and chose in that moment—which is the experience of *God: now!*—to guide the huge engine of the self, still loving life, to destroy the plans of evil in that cockpit, whatever they were, and at great cost, to dash those plans to death in the hard earth below. “God is alive in laid down lives,” we said.

Now, there is a risk in telling heroes’ stories, whether from the Bible or from our 9/11. It is that we see in them courage and resolve and wisdom we say we do not have, and thereby absolve ourselves from the risk of real growth. You hear it all the time, offered as humbleness, “I could never have done that.” Jesus says different. He sees that you and I choose the places of honor wherever we go, whenever we can. Like the Buddha, he sees that we seek pleasure and hate pain, that separation from what we desire is suffering—separation from that important place at the head of something, that warmth in the bosom of care we long for. He sees this. He says, *Do not sit down in that place of honor, lest you be dismissed from it in disgrace.*

He is not talking about banquet etiquette, nor about saving face. No, the subject is how to get beyond your suffering, your anxiety, your hunger, your guilt, your ambition, your lack of ambition, your fear, your need for new birth, your decay, your death. The subject is our life. And Jesus says you must do, and you can do what real heroes have done: Take the low seat. Look for it now. Do it. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” God is alive in the life laid down.

You see why this is so. In the ordinary suffering which was our subject at first, you think yourself on a roller coaster, moved up and down by forces you can’t control. Of course we are so moved; it is nonsense to pretend otherwise. But to get beyond our endless cycle of suffering births and deaths, we must engage the freedom gear. We must choose. We have not the strength or means always to go up toward our desired place of honor; it is inevitable that some day, we shall have to give that place to another. So take the low seat. It is the only act of pure freedom available to one who has awakened from ignorance. Do you have the strength for it?

You do not. I do not. If we did, martyr’s muscles would grow with our pride and the world would be impressed. But they don’t, and it isn’t. To take the low seat needs a strength you can only ask for in the present. You cannot build up a reserve. Do not worry if you feel you don’t have one—but neither say, “I could never do that!” Of course you can’t. Neither could they. It is God’s gift. And it is God who lives in the laid down life. You can only take the low seat in this present moment when you ask for the gift.

Christian life is life inside this story. In Christ Jesus, Eternal God chose to take the low seat, the place of a criminal, so that God might raise him up . . . where you would take notice. That’s it—raise him up high enough so that when we awake from our life—that *samsara* suffering— we might with the inner eye see that God has come down and has not left. God has taken the low seat to dwell with us and in us all, to give *us* the power God alone has, the power to take the low seat in perfect freedom. The truth of this story, whether God has made an irreversible incarnation in the Body of Christ, so that God might dwell in you, cannot be determined while standing outside the story. This too is humbling. Take the low seat.

Today, we baptized your babies. What an astounding thing we are saying with baptism. Of course this day sparkles with natural affection in and for the family. But beyond the warmth and place of family, Jesus Christ is calling these children his brother, his sister. These children will grow up and suffer, as we all do. But in baptism today, as parents and godparents, as teachers and soul-caretakers of all God's children, we commit ourselves not first to family and to the familiar, but to the power of God to give these children freedom to take the low seat for the sake of the un-familiar. Baptism is us, already dedicating the child to the company of God's whole unfamiliar un-family, strange and big. In taking the low seat with the unfamiliar, there is peace, not as the world gives, and an end to suffering.

This baptismal confidence, that we are united alike in Christ's death and in his life, will thrust us boldly into the question of our times, so clear before us during these 9/11 memorials. Nine years ago, we prayed for lives laid down. Now we pray that we may learn to lay our own life down, for since those days, our wars have caused hundreds of thousands more lives to be cut down. Was it necessary? Was it just? Is it evil to try to strike evil with evil? May our response to those vexed questions no more haunt the graves of the past, but come to new life now and in days to come. One thing is sure. Muslim and Christian and Jew are closer now than they were before these awful things. I do not mean closer as in *warm-hearted* or *intimate*, though some have found such closeness. I just mean nearer. More likely to cross paths, as we do in this city where all God's great un-family walks the same streets, praying to the Eternal by many names, or none. Closer means there are more people at the table. Closer means the low seat matters more.

How will you do it? How will you take the low seat with respect to Islam—to Ishmael, the brother of Isaac? Will the loose gravel of ignorance and self-regard already underfoot at the pinnacle of our nation's achievement cause us to cascade into more violence and fear, as we scramble desperately to retake the top, all the while sliding into yet more grievous catastrophes? No. Remember your baptism. "For you have already died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God," (Col. 3.3) says the apostle. What is there to fear? Nothing can harm you. You are really free. Can we not therefore hope that the host of this city will see our Muslim brothers and sisters set down in the low seat they for so many generations have taken, and invite them up higher. Friends, fear not. Choose life. Take the low seat, that God's irreversible incarnation may live in you and shine from this city, set on a hill for all to see.

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