

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)
August 28, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 14:1, 7-14

There are those "you remember where you were when" moments in life. We all have them, and they range from triumphant to tragic. Whether it's the Kennedy assassination, September 11th, the Miracle on Ice, or the collapse of the Berlin Wall, some things are so engrained in our memories that we recall not only the event but also the entire context (as that context applied to us) in which it happened.

Being from the Upper Midwest, where memories, conversations, and virtually everything else had something to do with the weather, allow me to share one such example relating to a meteorological event...

On a Sunday afternoon, now fifteen years ago this past Friday, August 26th, I was pastor of First Lutheran Church in Hoople, North Dakota, and on my way back to the office to tend to a few tasks. The sky to the west was ominous. I could see flashes of lightning in the distance and hear a steady rumble of thunder. Having experienced my share of Midwestern thunderstorms in the northerly reaches of Tornado Alley, I knew that whatever was on its way was going to be violent. All the conditions were right -- hot day, high humidity, and a stiff breeze. It wasn't long until the heavens erupted.

Just after I arrived at the church, the tornado siren blew. In search of up-to-the-minute information, I tried the radio, tuning it in to one of the fixtures of local broadcasting -- 1340 AM, KXPO in Grafton, North Dakota. Amid the crackling static, there was nothing except for KXPO's regular, satellite-

fed programming. By this time, though, you knew something was on its way.

Then it happened. Wind, rain, and hail pounded the landscape. By this time, KXPO had a live announcer in the studio to give me some idea of the path and intensity of the storm. (Our cell phones back then didn't offer that kind of information!) I listened closely to the radio, and, looking outside, I noticed that it was really coming down...or sideways, depending on your perspective. I saw a few hail stones the size of golf balls, trees whipping in the wind, and a drenching rain to top it all off.

The tornado siren blew a second time. And the wind gusts were of a gale force. Generally, I don't get too scared in bad weather, but I must've been a bit shaken given the speed with which I scurried down to the church's basement. There, I spent the remaining minutes of the storm in the security of a concrete shell.

For the time being, I felt safe.

A few minutes later, I came upstairs and could see breaks in the wall of gray out in the west. The storm was soon over. When I left the church, I saw a typical aftermath around town -- branches down, leaves all over the place, and a tree or two uprooted.

It was a bad storm, for sure, but I soon found out that it was nothing in comparison to what had happened to the community of Northwood -- about an hour's drive away. A funnel cloud had been spotted by Hoople (where I was), but one had touched down in Northwood -- an F4 tornado, in fact. Damage there was widespread. I can only imagine the utter helplessness felt by the people of Northwood as they waited in the path of that beast of nature. There's nothing

you can do, except take shelter and hope for the best.

If we were in control, we could divert the paths of tornadoes, or, better yet, we could make them disappear completely. But this isn't the case, and it shouldn't be. Among other things, disasters call us as Christians to respond swiftly and generously to these situations. Sometimes they happen in faraway places to people we've never met, and other times they happen right in our back yards. Regardless, though, we respond in like manner, whether disaster strikes our next-door neighbor or a community halfway across the country!

Think, for a moment, of today's Gospel text in that light. Jesus tells a parable of how guests at a wedding banquet should not seat themselves in places of honor; instead, they should seat themselves in the lowest places. If they were to seat themselves in places of honor, there's the likelihood that they will be asked to move themselves down a few notches -- to their own humiliation. On the other hand, if they were to seat themselves in the lowest places, they could then be asked by the host to move to a better place, which would be far less presumptuous on their behalf, as well as eliminating the possibility of humiliation altogether. Jesus wraps it all up eloquently, saying, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

The text finishes with a role reversal. Now the audience is host instead of guest. But the theme of humility prevails. Just as in the earlier scene, where the guests should take the lowest places at the banquet, we see them asked to behave the same way when they're throwing the party. As hosts, they are asked to move out of their comfort zone of friends, relatives, and rich neighbors. Now it's their turn to invite the lowliest among them into their

fellowship. Jesus says, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13).

Hopefully, the point is clear. Even those of us who probably won't be giving banquets anytime soon (you can certainly count on that in my case!)...we have a call to heed. That call is to abandon all those comfort zones in which we lounge and to take up the needs of those on the outside. And there are needy people outside. They may not be poor, crippled, lame, and blind, but they may be stressed, exhausted, sad, and weary. We know very well that our banquet is a banquet of resources, and our call is to creatively share that banquet wherever we may find a need.

Now, think back on all those "you remember where you were when" moments in your life. What was your response to the situation? Did you pray and look for hope in times of tragedy? Did you give thanks in times of triumph? Did you help -- whether with money, labor, or moral support -- in times of disaster? If you answered yes to any of these, you, in your own way, have offered the banquet that Jesus is talking about. We all know Jesus had more in mind than a dinner party; indeed, this is about taking the posture and attitude of a servant.

This banquet is one of helping hands and compassionate hearts. There is neither a guest list nor a blacklist. All are invited. And our example to the rest of the world will be clear: We can show them all that there are Christians who are responsive to the needs of others and glad to help out. This banquet is a feast of genuine charity and robust service.

And what about a fee for services rendered? Or even a little tip? Well,

Jesus reminds us that "[we] will be blessed, because they cannot repay [us], for [we] will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

Jesus hits right on something that's engrained in us. We do look to be repaid, if not in money, with a pat on the back. But when we're faced with something that won't get us that little reward that we want, we might be more hesitant. Jesus argues, however, that the blessing comes not in the money or in the pat on the back; rather, it comes in the resurrection -- the eternal fulfillment. One is short term, the other is forever.

So -- that said -- why bother? After all, there is no reward for us, really. There is no way for us to trace the path of every dollar we put in our collection plates. Heck, there's even no way of knowing that whatever work we do will last a day after it's completed. But it's still good nonetheless. If I can't convince you of this, Jesus surely can.

If there are any rewards to giving of ourselves -- whether it's money, labor, or time -- they're almost always spiritual. And you know what it feels like when you've given of yourself genuinely and generously. I think Jesus tells us, too, that the eternal reward will feel the same. Resurrection of the righteous is equated in our text with resurrection of the generous.

But don't throw a big banquet just to keep yourself on God's good side. Do it because you want to share your blessings with someone else. The reason why we "remember where we were when" is because some events are so extraordinary in comparison to our ordinary workaday lives...so much so that the moment they happened sticks with us forever. And yet, Jesus calls you regardless of the gravity of the circumstances. Don't just "remember where you were when"...re-

member where and who you are right now. You are Christians called to humility and to service, and to be present and to be listening ears among all your brothers and sisters throughout the world. When you think of how richly our Lord has blessed us, this response to his call is but a modest one.

Yes, we set out the banquet not only in times of triumph, tragedy, or disaster, but every time we see a need. Our humility, service, genuineness, and generosity are "courses" in the banquet we can set out every day!

Amen.