

“Growing In Goodwill”

LPNC Holy Communion Sunday Service

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September 26, 2021

Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 29:1-7

Luke 14:12-24

Hymns/Songs

"Give Me Oil" 351

"Break Thou the Bread of Life" 101

"The Servant Song" 620

Jeremiah 29:1-7

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles

29 These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: ⁴ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Luke 14:12-24

The Parable of the Great Banquet

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

¹⁵ When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶ But he said

to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. ¹⁷ And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' ¹⁹ And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' ²⁰ And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' ²² And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' ²³ And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

Insight for Worship

True Christianity 423 by Emanuel Swedenborg

This is goodwill itself because it can be defined as follows: goodwill is doing good to our neighbor daily and constantly—not only to our neighbor as an individual but also to our neighbor collectively. The only way to do this is through practicing goodness and justice in our position and work and with the people with whom we have any interaction, because these are things we do every day. When we are not doing them, they still stay in our minds all the time; we think about them and intend to do them.

People who practice goodwill in this way become better and better forms of goodwill. Justice and faithfulness shape their minds and the practice of goodwill shapes their bodies. Over time, because of their form, they get to the point where everything they want and think about relates to goodwill. In the long run, they become like the people mentioned in the Word who have the law written on their hearts [Jeremiah 31:33]. Such people also take no credit for what they are doing since they are not thinking about receiving credit for it; they are thinking about their duty. In their view, acting this way is the right thing for citizens to do.

SERMON: "Growing In Goodwill"

Like me, when you're reading and meditating on God's Holy Word, are there times when you come across particularly poignant and powerful stories that cause you to say to yourself: "Oh my goodness, Lord, please forgive me, because I really see right now that I have a long way to go before I am truly spiritually ready and fit to be with you in Heaven after death!"

Our Gospel lesson this morning is one of these sorts of verses for me, in the Lord's "Parable of the Great Banquet." When I read it with humbleness and

vulnerability, with my heart and mind open to the Lord...asking God to speak to me personally, it tells me a lot about my own need to continue growing in goodwill toward my neighbors near and far. This amazing vignette within the great three-year journey of Christ took place on a Sabbath Day, while Jesus was sitting at table with a prominent Pharisee and other scriptural lawyers back then. There were a number of times that Jesus was invited to the home of a local Pharisee, those who were the orthodox Jewish religious leaders of Christ's day. The opening verses of *Luke 14* tell us something important, which was that the Pharisees and religious scribes were not interested in learning from the Lord, but rather to keep a close watch of everything Jesus said and did. They did this with the hope of catching Jesus "red handed" you might say after breaking their religious laws.

The Lord understood the hearts and minds of those near Him, and so He understood that the Pharisees and scribes had their own spiritual struggles and weaknesses, and **one of their greatest weaknesses was that of egotism:** they thought very highly of themselves and they tended to think in very judgmental ways about others, especially those who were poor and sick, and many others they labeled as "sinners." So, out of mercy and kindness our Lord decided to tell another parable to those in attendance that day. Christ often used parables or fictitious stories because they were easier for people to listen to as compared to straight out, blunt truth, which many people struggle to hear.

One of the greatest and most difficult evils or selfishness that we all struggle a lot with in life is that of having and maintaining compassion or goodwill towards people who are very different from ourselves. In my experience, it is relatively easy to have compassion and goodwill towards those who look like we do or who have a similar social status as we do. The Pharisees of Jesus' day also suffered from this sort of self-centeredness. So, mercifully, in order to try to help the Pharisees and scribes to begin to acknowledge the log of false thinking jammed into their own eyeballs, symbolically speaking, Christ shared this parable with them that day, known as the parable of the great banquet.

Jesus began by saying to the Pharisees that when they choose to have a feast or banquet where they live, it is much wiser to not invite their close friends, their brothers or those who are wealthy among them, but instead to send out invitations to **"the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind...because they cannot repay you."** (Luke 14:13-14)

Shortly after these words, the Lord then shares this parable, which is our focus for today. He said that there was a generous man who decided to have a great banquet in town. This man sent out many invitations to his friends, who at first accepted his invitation. Spiritually speaking, the Lord often sends out spiritual invitations to the people of the church, but instead of coming to His great feast (which symbolically would be the feast of goodness and truth given to us through God's Word), instead of attending they all came up with excuses of why they did not want to attend.

With all of us here today, we can say that the Lord gives us a lot of material food, doesn't He? We can think of the hundreds of times we have gone to Kroger's or Aldi's

or Al's grocery stores and there is food and beverages in abundance for us to choose from. But all of the varying types of food we find at our grocery stores mean more to us than just physical sustenance—they also symbolize the abundance of spiritual food for our souls, which we need even more than natural food, in order for us to grow and develop spiritually.

Think about it my friends: one day (and who knows when), all of us are going to do what our good friend Judy Freeman did recently—we will all make our way through death's doorway, when we will leave behind our physical body so that our souls (which last forever) can begin our spiritual lives bound for Heaven. And it is the kinds of spiritual foods we eat, digest or make use of that will determine the quality of our spiritual health after death. The truth is that God often sends us invitations to feast on the goodness and truth found within His Holy Word, but are we willing to respond to God's invitation, or are we making excuses to put other, more worldly things, as our top priority?

Are we overly occupied with our many little worldly occupations, interests and anxieties that we feel we cannot make ample time for good religion? In this parable, the man making the feast first sends out invitations to his friends, but they have convenient excuses and so they do not attend the banquet. Then the master of the house tells his servant to go out quickly to the city streets and lanes and **“bring in the poor and crippled and the blind and lame.”** So, perhaps we need to ask ourselves, why are we not having such banquets within our church walls? Does our goodwill need a “booster shot” to help us to put love into action in these ways?

We know intuitively that the poor, crippled, blind and lame people of this parable symbolize those from anywhere on Earth who humbly realize their own shortcomings, their sins and weaknesses and their ignorance, and these are the ones who are attentive to the Lord's calling to meet up with Him within His Holy Word and dine upon the love and truths we find there. Everyone who calls themselves a Christian are the first invited guests to sup with the Lord at His table. In a few minutes we are going to hear the Lord's invitation to us to dine with Him at His Holy Supper. The bread and the wine of this ritual represent the goodness and truth that the Lord gives to all of us freely. This meal, just like the meal provided freely in this parable of the “Great Banquet,” is symbolic of what God is freely giving to us all the time!

The Lord continually reveals and shares with us of His love and truth found in His Word, and **as we learn it and understand it and then when we apply it to our everyday relationships and activities of daily life (obeying God's wisdom), then the Lord's goodness and peace and mercy freely flow through our own hearts and minds.** We can say, succinctly, that when we freely choose to enjoy this amazingly personal and mutual partnership with God, He gradually develops one of the greatest and most powerful forces of Heaven in existence: **goodwill towards everyone, our friends, the strangers around us and our enemies as well.**

We can essentially define goodwill as a kindly, merciful, friendly disposition that desires the wellbeing of others, done so without any thought of reward. Goodwill is wanting to think positively towards others, to be of use and service. Goodwill is not condemning and it focuses on what is hopeful. It is also a friendly

feeling or attitude, which grows throughout life until it flows through all of our thoughts, hopes and goals of life. It is wanting to look out for what is needed in any situation, so that good may result. My own spiritual goodwill manifests within my mind, asking such questions as these:

“What can I do today that demonstrates my commitment to God’s other-oriented calling?”

“How can I help?”

“What do I know that I’m uniquely positioned to do that can make the world a better place?”

And, “I may have griefs, disappointments or frustrations in my life, but I know that the Lord is present everywhere, and He is constantly guiding life toward what is good and true. What may I do now, today, that will help God’s stream of providence flow more freely today?”

In conclusion, *Jeremiah 27* informs us that goodwill is also about seeking the welfare of the city..., and praying to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Amen.

Let us pray....

Heavenly Father, we thank you for speaking to each of us today, personally, and individually through your Holy Word. Help us come before you each day as we meditate on what is good and true, wanting you to put your Covenant deep within us, writing it upon our hearts. Only your love, your goodness and your spiritual truth, O Lord, can blossom into ever-growing goodwill towards all humanity in us. Even when we are wronged and others have hurt us, Lord, we are more than able to grow in goodwill. I am reminded of the awesome prayer that you once spoke while hanging upon a cross, dying the most painful death when you said aloud, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” (Luke 23:34)

Help us Lord to have such depth of goodwill inside of our hearts towards both our friends and our enemies. We pray these things in your holy name, O Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.