

“Good Manners, Good News, and Hard Teachings” based on Luke 14:1, 7-14 and Amos 5:18-24
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, August 28, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Six years ago, to the day, on August 28, 2016, I preached this text for my 2nd sermon – ever. We had just finished our 1st year at Seminary and Harrison was nearly 8 months old. So, we had gone up to New York, to First Presbyterian Church of Watertown, where Rev. Fred Garry, whom many of you met at my installation, was still pastor.

Two years earlier, Fred had shared the pulpit with me the first time, and now, I was there again, this time with friends and family. They had all come, not so much to hear me preach, but to be there for Harrison’s baptism, which Fred did for us that morning.

And so, it was a festive occasion – Local friends came out, some we’d known 10-15 years. My sister drove 3 ½ hours to be there with her husband and two-month-old son, and Claire’s parents came all the way up from North Carolina, to be there too. We booked the banquet hall of a local establishment and had a great time. We had only been gone a year, but this was a tremendous reunion, as we got to see people then, whom we’ve barely seen since. We had lots of food, cake, and an all-around great time, all to celebrate Harrison’s entry into the church.

But before the baptism in the service, and before the party afterward, I was nervous. The pulpit was new to me, though admittedly, I get a little nervous still, even today. I remember frantically scrambling to write something that I just hoped would make sense, and nervously sitting in Fred’s office that morning, trying to get it printed. And so, I began my sermon as I do every Sunday, with the reading I was focusing on, and with a prayer, and then, I dove right into it.

About three minutes in, all of a sudden the back doors of the sanctuary opened. A man walked in. He came right down the center aisle and sat right in the front row by the lectern. This man was about my height and my size. He had a long unkempt beard, and long hair. He carried a small backpack that he wore to the front atop his large belly. On that warm summer morning, he had jeans on, and boots. Yes, boots that were coming apart, the soles separating from the shoe, making a loud clapping sound as he walked.

I knew him. His name is Alan. I knew Alan pretty well actually. But he had not been a guest. Alan would walk the city every day, and on most Sundays, he would randomly stop in a church when he was tired, and sit through the rest of the service, and then have a snack after in fellowship. When I worked at the Urban Mission, I saw Alan often, and so I knew his case fairly well. You see, when he was younger, he had a heart attack, and after he had recovered, he was left deaf in his left ear, and so, he spoke by screaming, holding the ear.

He wasn’t homeless. On the contrary, his problem was that he had a home. You see, he had never been educated, as a child, he was abused. He’d allegedly been confined to the basement of his home. The rumor was that he had been chained to a radiator. Eventually, his parents died, and he was left in a home that was paid for and enough SSI disability benefits to cover the property taxes on it. Owning a home, meant that apart from disability, he was ineligible for most programs.

With so many limitations and despite his home, he needed a great deal of help, and so, he came to the mission often, and made the rounds to the churches, getting what he could to help him make ends meet and get by. One church even helped him clean out his home and make repairs, including the replacement of his only toilet, which had been broken and out of service for years. The bathtub served that purpose. The smell, the pastor told me, was terrible.

Alan survived on cheap, highly processed, high calorie foods, with little nutritional value. These are the kinds of things that can make you obese, even when you walk miles and miles each day. These are also the kinds of things unfortunately that are most often donated to the food pantries he frequented, or that he bought cheap in stores. Unemployable, he just walked all day, without a routine for hygiene. You often smelled Alan's body odor before you saw him.

In recounting the story to a fellow seminarian, I was commended for continuing to preach with this response: *"I don't know what I would have done if I had been preaching. What a distraction! The ushers should have made sure he stayed in the back."* The thing is, given the text from Luke, Alan made me feel comfortable. I knew him, and I knew this text was about welcoming him in. Alan had no way to repay anyone, yet, he got a front row seat.

I loved talking to, or trying to talk to Alan, and this let me get a little self-righteous. My friend, who is a wonderful pastor, and welcomes many marginalized people into the love of God, had come from an orderly, wealthy family, and here was just being honest. This shows just how difficult it can be to truly understand Jesus and comprehend what God's love for us means. The friend worried about the worship service and me and how it affected me in my second sermon, dealing with a loud, odorous distraction.

But Alan was not a distraction. No, in truth, the distraction was the baptism. You see, I could have invited Alan to Harrison's party, but it never crossed my mind. I had just preached a text in which Jesus told me what to do, and for whom, and so, there I was distracted by the festival, our liturgical worship, and the feast of celebration to follow for my son and our family. And yet, truly Christ in one of the least, was present there, and though not intentional, I excluded him.

I honestly missed the connection until just a week ago, reading this Luke text with Amos. It was a suggestion Bruce made when he agreed to be part of this service. So, before I saw my error, this was a point of pride in a way my fellow pastor didn't, because I was not distracted but comforted by Alan. Neither my friend, nor I, fully grasped the ways in which we fell short of Jesus here. We missed the opportunity to serve in the way that is supposed to undergird our worship.

We had the show but our expression of love for God lacked the fullness of what it means to love for neighbor. It was just the kind of thing God was speaking about in Amos, the kind of thing God hates, what God rejects. To God, the foul smell was not Alan's body odor, but our dismissal of Alan's presence which smelled awful.

This moment of confession is not meant for you to offer me words of consolation and say, I'm only human and all of that. My confession is meant to highlight that this text is just as difficult

for me as anyone. It is just as difficult for two seminarians being trained to lead the people of God. The church as a whole has long struggled with this very idea for 2,000 years. Putting ourselves in the role of the least, who is to become first, rather than recognizing our own need for true humility, the kind that comes when we go down to others and raise them up, as Jesus did, reaching out to the poor, outcast, and marginalized—those who cannot repay.

You see, Jesus offers wisdom in this passage, directly reflecting Proverbs 25, verses 6 to 7. *“Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, “Come up here,” than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”* We live in a world that tells us to take what we can, when we can. We are told to name it and claim it, to have dream big dreams, and to not be afraid to go for the best when we can.

The book of Proverbs and here Jesus after, reminds us that this is not a wise decision. Sure, taking the best seat can move you up, but can also humble you. And so, Jesus echoes the words of Proverbs, highlighting humility's advantage. But he turns to his host to put a catch here. If we humble ourselves merely as a strategy to limit our shame, then wouldn't we just be seeking the same end game – our own honor. Instead, if the Kingdom of God is what we are seeking, then to be like God is to serve those who cannot repay. It's to share our fortunes and feasts with Alan, or at least, the 'Alans' God puts in our lives.

Indeed, it is the Lord who made us, so what do we have to repay God who made everything? There's nothing that God actually needs. Instead, God made us in God's own image with the ability to love and create, and the freedom to choose what we love and create. It's the freedom to use these powers for God's will, or to hold them back for our will. When we hold back, we sin – we do not love God and our neighbors. Our sin brings misery, not just for ourselves, but those who are innocent bystanders to our sin. This is not as punishment. No, it is a consequence. You see God needs nothing, yet desires love and faithfulness.

Amos's words, reframed in the lyrics of the song which Bruce sang today, are a challenge to all of us, especially those of us who do belong to a church. It's because we are tempted to assume we please God, and in the day of the Lord, we are the ones God will save, because we worshipped God in church every Sunday. But Amos's challenge to the comfortable in Israel 2,500 years ago, is a reminder of the true worship which God desires – a worship that looks to the future and what this world can be, which is good news.

This is not good news because we will escape God's wrath and get a ticket to heaven, but because we are called to share in God's work – *Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.* This is the work of justice and righteousness, in a ministry of reconciliation, where we include and embrace others, seeing God's image in them, and revealing God's love, by coming down to be with them.

You see, the Jesus we see in Luke's gospel goes from the margins of Galilee in today's reading, and will soon head toward Jerusalem, where he will be crucified, die, and rise again, after which Jesus will send the disciples to the margins and beyond, to the world. In truth, the people of God in Jerusalem believed they had honored God in the temple feasts, Yet the writings of the

day lamented that God was not there. The people of God in Jesus's day earnestly sought God's favor, and they prescribed the ways to be individually pious. Part of that was excluding those they thought made them impure. Some escaped the world altogether, expecting salvation to come to them in the desert, when the day of the Lord came, and everyone else was destroyed.

But this is not what God spoke through Amos, or what Jesus embodied and preached. You see, in Amos, God's word is given to the prophet to challenge the status quo, and in Christ, God's word became flesh to do the same – and it is good news. It's good news because God came down to share in our human limits, to live as we live, die on the cross for us, and rise again to new life, beginning a new creation reconciling all things in him.

My sisters and brothers, these are difficult texts urging us to overturn the ways of the world. The Good News is not some formula that if we just have the right kinds of worship services, and if we do the right kinds of works, and we just avoid a certain list of sins, then in the day of the Lord, we earn heaven, and escape a bad creation. No, if this is how we seek to live, then as Amos warns, it will be the day of the Lord will be darkness.

The Good News is that God loves us first and has saved us, so that we are empowered to follow Jesus, and little by little, even if it's so hard, we can play our part in reconciling God's good creation to him. In the resurrection on the last day, when all things will be restored, and made new, the love we shared will be preserved too, because of its faithfulness to Christ. We can bring this good news to all, regardless of whether we judge them to be worthy of the Good News, by inviting those whom we will never see repayment to sit with us as God's own beloved.

Again, it isn't easy to do – it's a challenge for me and I hope less of one for you. Yet, I am more willing to believe in the reality of Christ, before I believe in what people say is the reality of this world. I'd rather be naïve in Christ, then a realist according to the world's standards. I believe we can share the love of God with the poor, the marginalized and even with those who may never repay us at all – in any way at all. Now, here's the hard part – this means we love and serve as a means of loving and serving the Lord – even if, the people we love and serve do not love the Lord, and if all our loving and serving never changes the fact that we think they walk in darkness, apart from God. That's what love is. It's what loving our enemy is.

Sharing the good news is about knowing God's love for us, that we are chosen, And then without fear, giving up any status we might think we deserve based on our faith, based on our church attendance, based on all those things that are important, but which ultimately must be grounded in loving and serving our neighbors. In order to be like Christ, who though equal with God, was humbled, and chose compassion, chose a love that overcomes fear.

We must be mindful of this at all times. Jesus wants the people to not fear taking a lesser seat, even if the world says to take what you can, when you can. Jesus says not to fear giving without expectation, because in the end, God will sort it all out. Resurrection is presented here not as a reward, but a means of empowering us to act. Letting compassion, not fear, be our guide.

So it is, my sisters and brothers, that Christ calls us in challenging and difficult ways. If you find this impossible to consider, you are not alone – I confess my own failure at this, and I know the whole of Christian history has struggled with this very notion. Because despite our emphasis on repentance in the church, we still struggle to confess sin and admit, ‘Hey, what we did back then was wrong.’ As GK Chesterton said, in one of my favorite quotes: *“The Christian Ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”*

What if we started today, little by little to reach out and let ourselves first be driven first by compassion, and never by fear? What if we never rested on what we have already done, or what comes easy to us? What if we took seriously the challenges of Jesus, the Word of God in our flesh, and we actually listened to the Lord speaking through the prophets? What if we sought to flood the world with justice, raising the lowly, working to bring an endless stream of righteousness for all, by choosing to love and create faithfully as God wills, humbly seeking to be Christ like in this world?

It's not easy, but O what a world it would be. Wow. Indeed, it would certainly be Good News. Amen