

Priorities

Luke 14:1-14

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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Everybody has priorities in life. All of us make our decisions or plan out things, based on what's most important to us. That's what having priorities means: deciding what's important to you, so you can do the most important things first; or at least make sure they get done when the time is right.

Everyone here has had to make priorities; you still do it. Think about what you put first. Family is always first, right? Family is most important. But what about work? If you want to eat, and have a roof over your head, you'd better make sure you're at work when you're supposed to be at work. At first that sounds contradictory. If family is priority number one, then shouldn't you be spending all your time with them? You'd think so. But *taking care of* family, making sure family's taken care of, that's the important thing. If you love what you make a priority, then you protect it and work to preserve it. If being away from the family for several hours each day is what you have to do to put that roof over the family's head, and food on the table, then that's a priority that fits within another priority. You do both!

Here, Luke presents three stories, actually four, where Jesus teaches us how to arrange our priorities. The bottom line: people come first!

The first story has Jesus preparing to eat with some Pharisees on the Sabbath. (By the way, right here is an example of a priority within a priority. You have to eat on the Sabbath; but doesn't that require some work to prepare the food, at least minimally?) Luke notes that they were watching him closely. What he doesn't say is why. Most of the time, you'll hear why: "The Pharisees were watching him closely *to see if he...*" did

something. Then they'd accuse him of breaking the Law, and etc. Suddenly, in their midst on this Sabbath, was a man who had "dropsy." Do you even know what dropsy is? I had to look it up. It's swelling caused by fluid retention, oftentimes very noticeable in the face, legs, and arms. Sometimes you even see places where the skin looks pitted, like someone has dug holes in it. We know today that it's caused by things like heart failure, kidney or liver failure. So that means: this person with dropsy has a serious underlying medical condition. And if the dropsy was that noticeable to those first-century people, this man was in serious condition. Seriously BAD condition. We might even call it "life-threatening."

So here's this grotesque-looking man showing up at a swanky Pharisee dinner. (Because you know those Pharisees, they never did anything on the cheap.) Jesus could have quietly healed him outside, I suppose, out of sight. But this was what we call "a teachable moment." Jesus asks them, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?"

Sounds like a dumb question, right? Even modern folks like us have known for a while that some things take priority over Sabbath observances. You remember the Blue Laws, right? Most of you do. They were the laws that kept stores and businesses closed on Sundays. Do you remember what were allowed to open? Drug stores! (But only for prescriptions and medical needs.) The priority was preserving life. People were important, more so than the laws. Police officers worked on Sundays, too. So did firemen. Again, it's about preserving life. About taking care of people!

So Jesus was trying to point out that the Sabbath laws were important, BUT only insofar as they were about people and their well-being. In fact, in the second chapter of

Mark Jesus says, "Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." Those Pharisees didn't know what to say. They were silent. We usually ascribe their silence in scenes like this to resistance, to being opposed to Jesus and not wanting to fall into his trap. But the text doesn't say that here, so maybe we shouldn't say it, either. I think it's at least possible that those Pharisees were silent because they hadn't thought of the Sabbath that way. And the reason is really sad.

Sad, because of what it said about the Law and the people. God had given the Law as a help for humankind, something to *help preserve life!* Or at least to make it better. It was a gift! Remember the words of God in the beginning of the Ten Commandments? "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The "therefore" is implied, but completely understood: "...*therefore* you shall have no other Gods before me." The Law was supposed to be a big help, something to *help people*. What it became, instead, was a system of things to do to impel God to forgive you and give you blessing. Oh, and by-the-way, it had become a system for advancement in that very God-oriented society. It was selfish; the only person who mattered was YOU, so you needed to obey those commandments. And the Sabbath commandment was huge.

It was this very self-centeredness that Jesus was trying to address, this misguided set of priorities. When he didn't get an answer from those Pharisees, he turned to the man with the dropsy and healed him. You can imagine that the man suddenly went from looking hideous to looking – well, normal. Usually you get some sort of reaction to a healing like this. But here, we don't get one. That tells you that what

comes next is really important. And what came next was Jesus' teaching. He asks them an obvious question: "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" I bet every one of them had done something like that at some time in their lives – probably many times. They had probably watered their animals that very morning. And sure, it seemed to go against the rules about working on the Sabbath. But it had to do with people or animals they cared about. It was a strenuous reminder about priorities.

There is more to learn. At this same banquet, Jesus noticed how people tried to take the best places for themselves, the "places of honor." Now, understand: having a "place of honor" meant the food bowls would go by you first. They served meals by passing around bowls filled with the food. You'd get to dip out the good stuff for yourself. There would always be plenty for the honored guests. The lesser-ranked person at the end of the table might not get as much, or might get just bits of food left in the broth. So if you rushed to get to the "places of honor," you were literally pushing to get to the head of the line. You were putting yourself first. That was your priority.

But it was also about ego, and place. You want to be seen with the high-up muckety-mucks. It might help your business; it might mean good things for you. It might also mean embarrassment. You *could* get asked to move down! But what if you started out down there with the "lower people?" Would you be putting yourself first then? No; and here's the thing: the "host" Jesus refers to here might be God! The meaning is clear: If you DON'T put yourself above others, and if you associate even with the

poorest and lowest as if they were your equals, then God the host will honor you in a special way. Why? Because God wants you to put other people first.

Then Jesus turns to the one who hosted the banquet, and tells him the most remarkable thing. You ought to invite the lowest people! No one in Israel was doing that, of course. To the host, it was probably unthinkable. Why, some of those lower people might make me or my house unclean! It's this sense of "me first," the priority of self, that Jesus is addressing. He puts it this way: "do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid." No, your priority ought to be what God wants from you. Invite those lowest people! Then "you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Your first priority ought to be doing what God wants; you'll see that when you receive an eternal reward.

Do you see how the priority here is what God wants? From healing a person to associating with the lowest to inviting people without thought about receiving something in return, it's all about other people – and God. Jesus closes out this section with his story about the man who hosted the banquet, and invited many. But all of those invited had other "priorities" and wouldn't come. That's what happens when folks don't put others first. But those lowest and poorest – now they'll be only too happy to attend.

Our job in this life is to carry out the order of God to "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." It's all about putting others first. It's all about putting *God* first. That ought to be – must be! – our priority number one. Then we will receive the blessing God has in store for us all.

