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Trinity Episcopal Church

Proverbs 25: 6 – 7

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13: 1 – 8, 15 – 16

Luke 14: 1, 7 – 14

For the last few months, our Vestry has been reading and discussing the Rev. Eric Law's book, *Holy Currencies*. It's about creating organizations and congregations that are both missional and sustainable. Law, a Chinese-American, grew up mostly in New York City in the 1960s and '70s. He writes that his "family was considered poor by the monetary-minded world," but that he didn't know it. The family didn't ever have much money because it was constantly in circulation – coming in and going out, coming in and going out again. It wasn't all rosy, but no one ever went hungry, and anyone who wanted to work and be a part of the family business had a job. His mother told him once, when he was a little older, "We don't make a lot of money. But everyone who works in the business gets a piece of it." The family was very good at doing more with less.

When Law was a child, he says that the family always had guests for dinner. On any given night, there might be 12 – 15 people at the table. Dinner was always a time of joyful sharing of food and stories. Law thought that because there were always so many people at the table being fed, his family must be quite wealthy. Only after Law was older and he was reflecting back with his mother did he realize that they weren't rich at all. Somedays, his mother told him, she only had \$3 to feed 15 people. How could that have been, Law wondered, because he didn't ever remember when there was not enough food.

Law writes that what his mother did with the \$3 was a miracle in itself – she was good at shopping for foods that were in season and she was good at bargaining. But Law says that there was more going on than just that, because he remembers that no one ever left the table hungry and that there were always leftovers. How the family and their guests dealt with the leftovers was part of the miracle of doing more with less.

Toward the end of dinner, Law writes, there was always something left on the platter in the middle of the table. Everyone would stare at it, especially if it happened to be a piece of meat, which was only an occasional, special treat. Everyone would stare, but no one would make a move to take it. Then someone would say, "Why don't you take it Grandma? You're the oldest." "Oh no," said Grandma, "I've been eating this stuff all my life. Give it to the little one. He's the youngest and needs the nourishment to grow up to be big and strong." Now all eyes would turn to Law, who was youngest. But Law already knew this ritual, and so he would say, "No, not me. I am completely full because I have the smallest stomach. Give it to my older brother. He has an examination at school tomorrow. He needs it so he can do well." Law's brother would then say, "No, not me. Give it to my sister. She has a piano lesson tomorrow..." and the ritual would go on and on until each person would find an excuse not to eat the leftover food. The leftovers would go on to be transformed the next day into something else delicious. In offering the leftovers to each other, the family affirmed the worth of everyone at the table. The leftovers became a symbol of the family members' appreciation for each other's worth as well as a symbol of the abundance they shared.

These paired ideas of valuing others and abundance are what's at the heart of today's passage about a meal from the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, meals and table fellowship play a central role, more so than in any of the other Gospels. They are of profound theological significance for Luke. For Luke, not only is the Christian life a journey, it is also a party. And so we have several stories in Luke that are about parties and celebrations, such as the story of the Prodigal Father celebrating his son's return. And the Last Supper. The themes of journey and meals come together on the road to Emmaus.

In Jesus' culture, meals are important social events, ceremonies, rituals, where nothing is left to chance. People notice where one eats, with whom one eats, where one sits and whether one follows the proper protocols. Jesus lives in an "honor/shame" society, not unlike Eric Law's Chinese-American culture, and one does whatever it takes to achieve honor and avoid shame. Interestingly, the word translated as "honor" in verse 8 is *δοξα*, which is usually translated as glory. As in 'orthodoxy,' or 'right glory.' From that, we get a hint that Jesus is pointing to something other than just good etiquette. Another hint that there is a deeper meaning is that Luke calls it a parable. For Luke, and for Jesus, where some eat and some do not, or some do not eat as well, the kingdom is not present.

This is another one of those stories in the Bible where I don't know what people who take it literally do with it. Imagine everyone there at the dinner taking Jesus literally. There would be a mad rush for the most humble, least regarded seat in the room. And then everyone would be glancing nervously up at the head table waiting to be called up to a higher position. Does Jesus mean what he says? Absolutely. But modesty can be exaggerated, and feigned humility, seeking recognition, is actually a form of pride. For Jesus, true humility is a posture that leaves room for surprises and for grace.

Humility is perhaps a loaded word for us. It does not mean a continuous cringing, or cultivating a low self-image, or taking a perverse pleasure in being a door mat – always forgotten, unnoticed, undervalued. Theologian Roberta Bondi [*To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church*] says that what humility really means in a spiritual sense is a way of seeing other people as being just as valuable in God's eyes as we ourselves are. "It is a kind of empathy for the weaknesses in others that makes it impossible to judge others out of our own self-righteousness," she writes. Humility is our basic recognition that we each – every human being – draw our life's breath from the same source, the Creator God who has brought us into being. It allows us to see and know that we are no more and no less deserving of God's grace than anyone else. Humility draws us into relationship, not only with God, but with our neighbor next to us at the table. It allows no room for abuse or diminishment of others or ourselves. And it allows no room for the hierarchies, power structures and struggles of this world.

Valuing all others and rejoicing in the abundance of God's providence are two sides of the same coin. We cannot value others and live in a mentality of scarcity. We live in a world of great abundance - despite what we hear in the news – but we cannot truly enjoy that abundance without sharing it freely with others. For Luke and for Jesus, the meal, the party, the banquet is meant to be a place of graceful belonging, of joy and abandonment to the incredible abundance of God's gifts that flow freely. Anne Lamott calls laughter "carbonated holiness."

The Rev. Dan Clendinen [*Journey with Jesus*, Proper 17C 2010] tells a story about some family friends. The friends' daughter, Lisa, was getting married. She and her fiancé really wanted to invite the whole congregation, but they couldn't afford to do that. So, after the service, they asked the local police to block off the main street in downtown Waco, TX. Guests danced in the streets and enjoyed refreshments from an ice cream cart. The gazebo in the concrete park next to the theatre sheltered the wedding cake.

Lisa's husband, Chris, was a pastor, and he had made friends with a number of homeless men who lived under a bridge in the city. He had hired the men for odd jobs around the church. "Coyote," the leader of Chris' homeless friends, came to the wedding in his usual 'holey' jeans, a scraggly beard and unwashed hair. After the wedding and dancing, he organized the men to clean up the street, then sat on the curb with a big smile and smoked a cigar.

Another guest was Lisa's African-American neighbor, a little girl who enjoyed spending time with Lisa. So Lisa invited not only the little girl but also her mother and grandfather to the wedding. The 70 year-old grandfather became the center of attention as he started dancing in the street. The college girls were soon vying to dance with him. As passersby strolled down the street and inquired about what was happening, they, too, were invited to the wedding celebration. There were guests dressed in fine clothes dancing right next to guests who would never dream of being invited to a fine occasion. However they were attired, every person felt welcomed as an honored guest.

That's a really wonderful image of the Kingdom of God, and that's what Jesus is getting at in telling us to live in both a spirit of humility and a spirit of abundance. God turns the values of this world upside down. The Kingdom of God isn't about one-upmanship and jostling for recognition and power. The Kingdom of God is about a lavish banquet where there is room for all at the table. +