

“The Coffee Cop”

- My friends, if you know me at all, you know I have a love of coffee
 - Many might call it an addiction, but I say it is a deep and abiding relationship between me and the warm, happy beverage
 - I usually start my sermons on Fridays at Starbucks, we will come back to that in a minute
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 - This morning I want to share another coffee related story with you
 - Back in February of 2020, this is right before any of us knew about this thing called COVID-19
 - I went a conference for Endowed Episcopal Parishes in Louisville, KY
 - This was the perfect opportunity:
 - I was already beginning to think about St. Michael's own permanent funds and how to best move down that road
 - While COVID delayed that, we are already moving to create a campaign to raise these funds that will operated much like an endowment
 - You will be hearing much more from me in the months to come, for I think St. Michael's can be very well served with such an initiative
 - So I was at this conference to learn more about the nuts and bolts of such a thing, and I drove down and it was a wonderful 6 hour drive
 - I arrive at a nice hotel, change into my black shirt, collar, and jacket
 - And head down to conference floor where I could check into the conference itself- get my lanyard and such, you know the drill
 - I take the elevator, step off on the floor, and the first thing I see is a lot of people,
 - and vendors setup at tables arranged in a circle so you could walk around and see everything
 - And of course the coffee, and cookies!
 - Believe it or not, I do not immediately walk to the coffee, I know, I go first to check in and get my information
 - Then as I leave the table I begin my journey toward the oasis of coffee
 - Here's where it gets interesting... a guy whom I had not met, intercepted me and rather firmly told me to got round the other way
 - You know, I'm easy, and so shrugged and I turn and go around the circle in the other direction, a little puzzled, but otherwise unbothered

- So I make the circle the long way around and end up at the coffee, I get a cup and a cookie, and begin to figure out where I am supposed to go
- This same guy approaches me looking furious!
- He is outraged that I had gone the other way around and still gotten a cup of coffee
- That coffee was for his group! Not our group. His group paid for it!
- Unbeknownst to me, we were sharing the conference floor, and half of it was not ours...
- I tried to tell him that I had only just gotten out of the car and had no idea of that, but he would not let it go
- "Christians are the worst" he said, "always doing what they want and asking forgiveness later."
- He continued to dress me down loudly, even at my protests that my mistake was out of ignorance
- Finally I assured him that I would never drink his coffee again, he stormed off to his side of the room, taking up his post as its sentinel
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- Is it funny now? Yes. Was it in the moment. No.
- Have I forgiven him and gotten over it yet? Some. I'm working on it.
- I was left embarrassed, confused, shaking
- Feeling attacked for no good reason, and wondering if maybe I should just get in the car and drive back home
- I could not even eat that cookie!
- Later I found out that I was but one victim of said attacker... he was on a mission to protect his coffee and cookies.
- The Coffee Cop
- How much those insignificant things mattered to this man, certainly more than I did.
- And as I slowly get over the experience, how easily all of us can find ourselves in that position where something matters more than someone
- As I read this Gospel from Luke, and I hear Jesus use a dinner table as both a place of shared understanding
- And also a way of challenging those hearing him that day
- I thought about that guy, the Coffee Cop, how I can still feel the sting of such a violent verbal lashing
- And how just the polar opposite Jesus wants us to be.
- Certainly, how much different our churches should be.
- We find Jesus here at the dinner table after his "work" on the Sabbath
- Remember last week, he healed that woman of an 18 year long illness

- And I like to think he is intentionally pushing some buttons about how the culture and the society has forgotten the heart of God's laws
- And instead were more comfortable with legality and technicality, placing their focus on being right above the well-being of others
- In the few verses between that and this, Jesus again heals a man on the Sabbath day.
- Oh yeah, he's making a point for sure.
- Some things are just more important to Jesus at this moment, like the work God has given him to do
- Through this, Jesus gets an invitation to a dinner, which I imagine the host thinking that with Jesus there, the guests will never forget this
 - You just never know what Jesus might do or say next that would get a rise out of everyone!
- Tangentially, do you know the difference between dinner and supper?
 - Gaius and I were discussing this a while ago, and often where I grew up they were used interchangeably
 - But I have learned that dinner is the big meal of the day, where you dine with others
 - As opposed to lunch and supper which are fixed to a particular time of day, and are often smaller.
 - So you might have lunch and dinner, or dinner and supper
- So Jesus is attending a proper dinner, he is going to dine with them
- Dinners in the ancient world were very important in the social lives of the people
- They still are for you and me today
- It is through these big events that we sort ourselves: who is in, who is out, who is near the important people or action, and who is farther away
- In the ancient world, it was even more clearly defined
- Do you all know Pliny the Younger? ¹ His full name was Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus
 - He was a Roman contemporary of Jesus, and author who wrote many letters describing the world at that time
 - And he writes that at a meal such as this, everything is divided up based on who you were
 - Three different kinds of wine for three different "tiers" of guests
 - Different food being served to different groups

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny_the_Younger

- Of course the closer to the host you were sitting, the better food and wine you received
- And it was a direct reflection on what kind of relationship you had with that host.
- It was quantified
- And any violation of the host's ordering would never be forgotten, and could harm your place in society
- I think the host has invited Jesus just to see what he would do...
- Especially after he has healed twice on that very Sabbath intentionally ruffling the feathers of the religious leaders!
- I bet the host is waiting for the fireworks to start!!
- And Jesus does not disappoint!
 - He points out the obvious, but slightly veiled, social maneuvering
 - He starts by playing along, and giving good advice to everyone that comes straight out of Proverbs 25:6-7:
 - It is better to be told "come up here" than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.
 - It is sage advice, for then and for now honestly
 - The Message Bible says it like this, "But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."
 - And then Jesus turns to the host, and that is when the message shifts a little
 - He says to invite not those who can repay, but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind instead
 - Invite the ones that were excluded from everything, even prevented from being priests because of their physical condition²
 - Perhaps even take a risk that someone might begin to associate you with them, thus threatening your own social standing!
 - I see Jesus telling this host and future hosts of future meals to push back on the rules keeping everyone down
 - Just like Jesus has done by healing on the Sabbath
 - Break down the quid-pro-quo³
 - Pass on the grace and the love that you have received from God to someone else, perhaps giving them a chance to once again pass it on
- To come full circle, I was sitting in Starbucks on Friday and I saw a feeble women sitting at a table as I walked in

² New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Digital, Abingdon Press 2015 ©, Commentary on Luke 14:7-14

³ Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper17c>

- She was a patron, clearly having ordered food and drink
- But it was also clear that she carried bags, dressed badly, and pushed a shopping cart when she left.
- Thanks to my Starbucks habit, I had seen her several times that week already, sitting there wearing the exact same clothes each time
- Taking up a whole table for four with her things, and just eating and minding her own business.
- Going to the bathroom for a long period of time, and coming out looking like she had taken a quick bath in there
- But causing no disruption to anyone really
- As I sat down, the sin of judgment and pride came swiftly, as I wondered why they let her sit here so much
- And then I read this Gospel to prepare for the sermon this morning
- And I quickly asked for forgiveness, because I had suddenly become the Coffee Cop in my heart
- Sorting people, judging who deserved to sit there and who did not
 - Never mind that I ordered only one regular coffee
 - Then received one free refill, and sat there for hours... they had in fact made more money from her than me that day!
- As I pondered my God's work in my heart that day, I chose not to interrupt her, or dump my spiritual journey in her lap when she had not asked for it
- Instead I silently gave thanks for the Holy Spirit and the Word of God that warms our hearts and gently corrects us at times
- Brings us back to center and reminds us-
- That as a follower of Jesus Christ, I have received grace upon grace when I did not deserve it
- I have been ushered from the very bottom of sin, to God's table and given the best
- And God simply asks me to pass it on.
- I gave thanks, as I began to type this sermon, for the Holy Spirit who teaches us patiently time and time again how to follow Jesus.
- St. Michael's, we will begin a new program year soon, and we will have so many opportunities to do this very thing
 - To share the grace we have been given
 - Not only through Outreach to those beyond our walls, but to each other right here in these pews- seekers, sinners, and saints alike
 - In fact, one of the best models for church that I think needs mentioning from time to time, is one of a grace-giving training ground
 - Church is a place that we not only come to receive God's grace

- We can come to build up our own grace-giving muscles- it's like a spiritual gym
- Each Sunday we come to get a spiritual workout of grace giving
- Because here in church we desperately try to create something opposite of those formal dinners that Jesus attended
- Places that are not sorted by any human measure
- But we come here to practice creating a place where all are welcome and loved
- A table that is spiritually round, and that we can always pull up a new chair
- Where you don't have to be something to be here, act a certain way to be here, or even believe a certain way to be here
- You can be here because God invites you here
- You can come to this table because God calls you to it, and for no other reason
- And you can workout and build up the love and grace muscles in your heart
- So when you hear Jesus say, take up your cross and follow me, you can start lifting, and start loving,
 - And push back against hearts full of anger, disdain, and judgment, especially when they are ours
- It seems to me looking around the world that places like this, like what church should be, are not in abundance
- I need a place that reminds me and helps me practice the spirituality of non-judgement grace giving.
- One that allows me to try again when I get it wrong- we all do
- Among the many things we will do this fall, may we be a place where grace is received, and where it is given.
- A place where we invite God's Spirit and God's Word to break down our judgments, prejudices, and old traumas
- And replace them with love
- Look around- we're all on this journey together.
- Receive God's gift of grace, and share it.

Amen.