

Without Repayment
Luke 14:1, 7-14
September 1, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

As you know, we are again living in a parsonage, or a manse, whichever your preferred terminology. There were lots of things we liked about owning our own house, and lots of things we didn't like. And the same goes for living in a parsonage. Before we moved in, the church in La Grange did a ton of work on the house to get it ready for us, in a very short time frame. New paint all over the inside, new carpet, new kitchen sink and faucet and garbage disposal, they cleaned everything, put shelf paper in the kitchen cabinets for heaven's sake. Really, it was a delight to keep finding thoughtful things they had done. The pantry was stocked with paper goods and our favorite snacks and drinks. There was a huge basket of goodies on the counter. It was thoughtful and lovely.

And even after we've moved in, they've continued to work on the parsonage, some things at their own initiative and some at our request. There's new paint on the outside, a new garage door opener that doesn't sound like a piece of farm equipment, a new thermostat for upstairs, and just this week, a set of doors for the office-slash-guest-bedroom, which previously was doorless, and just in time for our first overnight guests. It's really been a nice welcome to a new place. And it's all been overseen, mostly all done except for the carpet and paint, by three people, the Trustees. That's it. They worked incredibly hard.

So I said to Andy not long ago, "We should invite the Trustees over for supper, to thank them for all the work they have done on the house." He agreed, so we're trying to figure out a good date. We'll include their spouses, and one woman's brother who isn't even a church member but has given his time and energy to several projects.

In a way, we're wanting to thank them, or repay them if you want to think of it that way, for the work they have done on our behalf. In no way does it balance out—they've done way more work than we will, preparing supper for them. But it is a gesture of repayment, an acknowledgement that we notice and appreciate their labor. It is also a gesture of thanksgiving.

Now, did they do all this work in the parsonage in hopes of getting an invite to our house for dinner? I sincerely doubt it. Our cooking isn't that remarkable. It's dangerous to assign motivations to anyone else's behavior, but I think I can come up with a few that aren't going to be too off base. For most of them, it is a

matter of fulfilling one's duty. This is the committee they are on at church, and this is what came up this year that needed doing, and it was their responsibility, so they did it. I do imagine that they wanted to receive our appreciation and thanks in some way and might have been a little hurt if we had not noticed, or seemed grateful, for all their work.

What I can confidently speak to is our own motivations. We are genuinely, deeply thankful for all the work they have put in. It makes us feel welcome and valuable and honored. And this supper we're planning is indeed an offering of thanksgiving for all their work. I don't like to admit it, but that's not our only motivation, deep down. We want them to think well of how we are keeping the house. We want them to keep doing maintenance and little projects. By inviting them into our space as guests, we want to encourage them in their committee responsibilities so they won't quit. Our motive of thanksgiving is genuine, but there is a tiny part of it that expects some kind of repayment, some kind of taking turns of "you do things for the house, we thank you by inviting you over for a meal. Then you do more things for the house."

The menu, by the way, is still under negotiation. Andy really wants me to cook chicken fried steak, which is kind of a pain to do for that many people. You see how I'm calculating this? It's not flattering. Their work on the house is somehow worth the labor it takes to make a casserole, but not worth the labor it takes to cook and clean up after chicken fried steak? I think I have just embarrassed myself into making the chicken fried steak, because I really am grateful for their efforts.

We—at least I hope it's not only me—we make these calculations without thinking of them consciously, trying to maintain or improve our standing and relationships. It's not that our feelings of gratitude and thanksgiving aren't real and sincere, but it's that they aren't the only things motivating our actions. It's hard to tease it all apart, and hard to admit it to ourselves, though I've just done it up here in front of God and everybody.

This bit of what Luke calls a parable really seems to just be some straight up instructions from Jesus, about how to behave in dinner party situations. As much as we unconsciously keep a running tally of who has done what for whom, the culture in Jesus' day did much more so, more consciously, and more openly. So your seat at a dinner party was an indication and reflection of your status in relation to the host and to the other guests. It would be more than embarrassing, close to horrifying, if you plopped yourself down in an "honored guest" seat and then the host asked you to move to a less honored seat. So Jesus advises, as does

our reading from Proverbs, to instead seat yourself in the less-honored seat, and then your host can elevate you by asking you to move to an honored guest location. It's strategic humility, and saves both you and your host a good deal of embarrassment.

What really caught my imagination as I read it this time was that next part, where Jesus instructs his host, and of course us as well, not to invite our peers to a dinner party, because they might repay us with a reciprocal invitation. Instead, he says, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, because they will not repay us in any way. It would seem reasonable to me for Jesus to instruct us to not seek out repayment. But he's telling us to avoid it, to ensure that no one will repay us. It's not "don't go looking for repayment, but hey if someone invites you over anyway then go and enjoy." Rather it's, "don't allow even the possibility that someone will repay you. Avoid it, even at great cost to yourself."

I don't want to skip over the clear instruction from Jesus that we are to invite those who would never ever be invited to anyone's dinner party, the least of the least. That's important instructions for us. But it's the *why* we are supposed to invite them instead of the more well connected that has sparked my thoughts this week.

What does this mean for us in the church, to avoid being repaid for our actions? I don't think that Jesus means to limit this instruction for dinner parties. I think he means it for everything we do. There's been a lot of work and writing done in the last ten years or so about churches doing short term mission trips. They're consistently beneficial for the people who go on the trip, but not consistently beneficial to the people who receive the mission teams. In fact, sometimes these communities are harmed or their spiritual growth is stunted by constantly hosting mission groups. Americans go on these trips with the best of intentions—to help and give. But we—and I'll include myself in this, because I've been on a lot of these kinds of trips—we do expect to be repaid. Now, we don't expect a direct repayment, of a group coming to our community. But we expect to be repaid with gratitude, with welcome, with appreciation for our efforts. Almost every participant on one of these mission groups will say, on their return, "I got more out of this trip than I gave." What would mission look like if we did it in a such a way that we actively avoided being repaid in any way? I'm not sure a mission trip would be possible under those restrictions, and I'm not the first person to say this—maybe we should take a hard look at mission trips.

Or really any mission-oriented activity, any outreach activity could be the same. We give out food at the food bank and want people to say "thank you" in

return. We offer a preschool in our church building and expect the families to repay us by becoming members. We pay someone's rent one month and want to be repaid by them leaving us alone and not asking for help the next month.

Friends, we worship and serve a God who gives to us out of love, who gives us God's very self as an act of grace, and who does so without expecting repayment, because repaying that kind of grace is out of our league, out of the realm of possibility for us. What would it look like for us to give in the same way, to give without expecting—even in the tiniest part of the back of our minds—to give without expecting anything at all in return, to avoid being repaid in any way at all. No "thank you," no joining our church or program, no following our rules, no nothing. That's how Jesus gives. And that's how Jesus calls us to give, too, without repayment.