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Calvary Episcopal Church, Americus
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Actions of small note

Luke 14:1-11

What someone does when they think no one is noticing speaks volumes about their character. The little things we do show who we are. Or to put it another way: “It is not in the most distinguished achievements that [one’s] virtues or vices may be best discovered; but very often an action of small note.”

Plutarch made this observation about the character of a person, noting that we don’t always see best someone’s true character in the big actions. Plutarch would go on to clarify, “A casual remark or joke shall distinguish a person’s real character more than the greatest sieges, or the most important battles.”

We will turn to the Gospel to see how once again Jesus is being tested. A group hopes that he will make a mistake at a dinner party that they can use that against him. But first, let me share an example of what Plutarch would call “an action of small note” that still reveals volumes. This concerns our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. When I served on the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, which is our denomination’s Board of Directors, I often saw how he acted behind the scenes. For example, I recall a decision to meet at a Best Western by the interstate when we were to gather in Austin, Texas. There was some grumbling about staying in cheap accommodations and he said something like, “Look, hotel meeting rooms are all the same. Once you are in it, it is just like all the others, but the cost matters. We might have a big budget to work with, but our budget as a church comes from the young couple raising kids who put \$10 in the collection plate and that was a gift that mattered to them as their first offering to a church. And that is matched with the offerings from people on a fixed income. And this comes together with the interest on investments from people who did very well and trusted the church with their legacy.” Bishop Curry added, “We have to remember where the money we spend comes from and that it was given by people trusting that we will use it rightly as the Body of Christ.”

You see how one acts when he or she thinks no one is noticing speaks volumes about the person. Jesus tells us in our Gospel for this Sunday that in our actions both great and small, if we are exalting ourselves, we shall be humbled, while “those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus says this while speaking as a guest in the home of one of the chief Pharisees. For those of us reading along in Luke’s Gospel, this is no surprise. Luke tells of 19 meals in the 24 chapters of his account of the Good News.

Jesus use of meal times also fit within the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures in which he lived. In the Greek and Roman culture, meals were very important indicators of social status. The person hosting a meal was looking to improve their standing in the community by offering a fine meal. The people who came to the meal were both those higher up the social ladder who could make the host seem more important and those lower on the social ladder who were looking to the host to improve their standing. If you accepted a dinner invitation, you would be obligated, to reciprocate.

While Jesus is often the guest acting as host when dining with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other notable sinners, this meal offers a more sinister setting. Luke told us in the first verse of this chapter that both the guests and the host were closely watching Jesus. The Greek word used here (*paraterounmenoi* which also in Luke 6:7 and 20:20) means literally to watch from the side. It implies “hostile observation” as it was used to describe someone watching you out of the corner of his or her eyes to catch you doing wrong. As if they have Plutarch’s challenge in mind, they want to trip up Jesus on some inappropriate action of small note while he thinks no one is looking.

It is in this setting that Jesus, characteristically, does the unthinkable. Jesus gives advice on how to handle social situations saying that the host should not invite people to dinner who can return the favor, saying:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, 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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Jesus often jars us into a new way of seeing the world, a new way of thinking. The Kingdom of God will look like a grand feast with all the faithful gathered around the table. Yet, God does not invite the best and the brightest to this feast. God invites folks not deserving. I know this because God invites you and me to the feast.

We are the poor, for we have nothing to offer God. We are the lame, for we seem incapable of giving all of our strength, our human might to God. We are crippled, by our past hurts that get in the way of serving God. And we are the blind, as we fail to see the world as God sees it. We are the ones who can do nothing for God and yet God invites us to the feast.

When looking at the Gospels, I ask myself “What is Jesus doing? What is the larger impact of this teaching? In the case of this dinner party, Jesus watched as people jostled for seats of honor, looking to move themselves a few rungs up the social ladder. Jesus cut through all that nonsense saying that rather than trying to rise in society, we should be concerned for those further down the way who might end up lost or left out. What the people at the dinner party thinks of you matters less than how your words and actions match God’s will.

To weave these threads of the sermon together, how might your words and actions instead match Jesus' call to act as God would have you to act while not worrying about what others think of you? We might have no decisions of great consequence to make this week, yet even in mundane choices our words and actions can show us to be concerned for others and not just for ourselves.

I find it apt that the reading this week of my first visitation as bishop to Calvary is about how we put our faith into action. Certainly, Americus is known for encouraging sweat equity when it comes to our faith as this is the home of Habitat for Humanity, which was founded and first took root in Sumter County's soil.

Then there is your famed, longest serving Rector, the Rev. Dr. James Bolan Lawrence, Brother Jimmy. No one in Sumter County had encountered a minister like him—"He smoked, he drank, he liked good stories..." He attended country club dances and made headlines for preaching a sermon in favor of golf on Sunday. A friend of his wrote, "He was often ignored, laughed at, and publicly made fun of," yet, Dr. Lawrence persevered. He carried the sick to hospitals, helped rehabilitate alcoholics, assisted boys and girls to get an education while teaching others himself. Well versed in Greek, Latin, and French, he was never heard talking down to anyone.

When he died, a mile-long funeral procession followed his casket, many on foot the 13 miles from Calvary to St. James in Andersonville. He left behind Calvary and St. James and Trinity in Blakely, some of the most beautiful village churches ever built, but that was not his legacy. The people in this corner of the vineyard loved Brother Jimmy Lawrence for his "kindness, selflessness and utter goodness."

Y'all know this lesson on being concern for others and not just ourselves. I sat at a dinner in the parish hall here at Calvary one evening and realized the two women on either side of me had given a kidney to someone and they did not know that about each other. Each with long connections to this church had risked their own life and health to make like better for someone else.

Calvary also nourished Gladys Crabb in word and sacrament. A distinguished teacher named a Great Lady of Georgia, when Mrs. Crabb died in 2021, she left a legacy that will never be fully appreciated this side of heaven. Gladys fasted every Friday and gave food money for that day to the poor.

As a member of the Junior Welfare League, she organized and taught developmentally disabled children out of the Central Baptist Church starting the program with the help of her preschool age daughter. The children remained part of the Crabb family for years and at Christmas, she and her family would visit them with Christmas presents. She was the tough teacher you loved fiercely as her gift was to challenge students to believe not just in themselves but in their best selves, the one that she could sometimes see before they could.

Then there is Ross Chambliss who I miss so much. This is my first visit to Calvary without him here. His quiet strength, unwavering faith, humility, and love continue to inspire me. I mourn with Charlotte and their family, but mostly, I give thanks for Ross.

I could go on with examples, but I trust that you get the point that Jesus wanted to shift us away from caring for where we stand in the eyes of society as we look toward caring for the least and those who would be left out. Jesus expects us to put our faith into action, even when no one is looking.

Any good works we might do are not for God's sake, but for our sake. Doing right builds us up to become more Christ-like over time as we choose to act in ways that fit more closely with our faith.

God will love us the either way, but I pray that in the week ahead, we will let the love of God shine through the choices we make, even in the actions of small note, so that others might see Christ in us even as we see Christ in them.

Amen.