

CRAZY EIGHTS
Sermon for Pentecost 15—Lk 14:7-14
LPC, 9/1/13

I haven't played cards in a long time, but I know that there are certain games like War and Crazy Eights where the object is to get rid of all your cards, and certain games like Bridge or Gin Rummy where the object is to take all the cards, or at least as many as possible. Suppose you sat down to play Crazy Eights in a Bridge mindset. There you would be, busily amassing cards and feeling proud of yourself, until the end of the game when your opponent would surrender his last card and shout, "I win!" I imagine you might be startled and dismayed. You might even protest, "That wasn't fair! I didn't know!"

Our lesson today from the Gospel of Luke is that *life* is more like Crazy Eights than Bridge.

Unfortunately, at every turn our culture tells us that life is like Bridge. Make the most of your high cards in order to take more cards. Finish with the most of the right *kind* of cards. Do what you have to do in order to do this, including deceiving the people to your right and left. Trick them and trump them in order to come out on top. Keep score.

I'm making Bridge sound terribly sinister, which of course it is not. I apologize to all Bridge-players out there. The point is, as Jesus says, life is not a game of Bridge, even though our media and our culture reinforce Bridge's competitiveness and acquisitiveness.

This is not a card I want to overplay, to keep the metaphor going. Demonizing the culture has led people to burn books, pass restrictive laws, and become self-righteous, overly ascetic, or paranoid. Creation is good. And our culture has many beautiful qualities. We are not to live in judgment or fear of our culture, any more than we need to stop playing Bridge. We just need to recognize where our values truly lie, if we want to follow Jesus. And our values as Christians are not, for the most part, the values of our culture.

This means that we need to heighten our awareness of when we are unconsciously adhering to the competitive and acquisitive assumptions of our culture. Having Christian rather than cultural values means that when presented with a conscious choice, we make our choices the Jesus way.

The Jesus way is countercultural because the Jesus way values all people, regardless of social status, or political power, or wealth, or talent, or beauty, or physical prowess. All you have to do is turn on TV or read headlines to know that this is not how culture works.

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Yet Jesus talks of the low-born, the disenfranchised, the powerless, the poor, the dull, the ugly and the weak sitting at the head table at banquets. If we want to follow God, Jesus says, we should invite such people to our tables. If Jesus means this literally, I think most of us are in trouble.

The thing is: I think Jesus does mean it literally, at least in part. The holiest people I have known do take this dictum literally, about inviting low people to their tables. But there is also a symbolic meaning.

Whenever Jesus speaks of banquets, especially wedding banquets, Jesus is talking about heaven. In heaven, the social hierarchies we observe, consciously and unconsciously in this culture, are meaningless. In heaven, the humble are exalted and the exalted are humbled.

Notice that I am using the present and not the future tense. I am not saying, “In heaven, the humble *will be* exalted and the exalted *will be* humbled.” This self-conscious use of the present tense is consistent with what I been preaching all Pentecost Season as we have worked our way through the Gospel of Luke.

Remember that a primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near in Jesus. This means that heaven is not only a vision of the perfected future. Heaven is not only something to which we look forward when we die. Heaven exists now, as sort of a parallel universe, closer than we can imagine. When we live according to heavenly culture, rather than earthly culture, the membrane between heaven and earth is effectively nonexistent.

Now, living counter-culturally is incredibly difficult. It would be like if we tried to forget we’re Americans, or members of our families. Our culture is in our blood. In many ways we will never be free of it. Wretched souls that we are, how can we ever aspire to the Jesus way of disregarding all the qualities in other people that we have learned to value?

With God all things are possible. We are powerless against our culture, but God, the source of all power, is on our side. God may send us out to do impossible things, but we go out with the immense power of God behind us. That is one reason I chose the hymn we just sang. The song begins with testimonies to God’s creative power, continues with the admission of human perversity, but then asks, “Whom shall I send?” And in our humility, we reply, “Here I am, Lord.”

Of course life, while sometimes crazy, isn’t really Crazy Eights. Life isn’t really a card game at all where the object is winning. But if it were, the point would neither be how many cards you collected, nor whether you got rid of them all, but, with God’s help, whether or not you shared the cards you were dealt.