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The Master Returns from the Wedding

Luke

Proper 14

Let's begin with something irrelevant. Today's gospel bears the marks of being a miscellany, a stitched together quilt made of pieces and fragments of the oral tradition. Luke associates them with each other because they use similar phrases or share words. The original meanings were quite distant.

A classic example is this business of the master coming back from the wedding feast – notice that unlike the other wedding feast story it's not about the wedding party coming to the house. In this story the master is coming back from a wedding party. The servants are supposed to be ready to open the door for him when he returns from the blow-out.

So what's this business, "If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming . . ."? Where does this come from? It's associated with the idea of the earlier passage about building an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes. "Thief" is a link word. So the passage is constructed on the basis of what, in New Testament criticism, is called word association. One has pieces of the oral tradition that one needs to use in one's narrative, but the gospel author isn't quite sure how to fit them in. The narrative is then built associating similar words. It probably also aided memorization.

So much for an irrelevant beginning. Not all New Testament passages are built on continuous, logical thought patterns. They frequently are, but not all of them. Sometimes they are just there because the author looks at the material he has with which to build a gospel and says, "Well, this is a neat saying of Jesus. We need to keep it, so where shall we put it?" It's rather like the freshman student who just can't bear to leave "neat stuff" out of his first paper. Well, these are the first gospels ever written and sometimes I have the feeling the authors just couldn't bear to leave out neat stuff.

Observation from Congregation: Don't you think that Luke, as a physician, would be a little more precise in his treatment?

Maybe, maybe not. There are plenty of physicians I'd not trust to write a coherently argued paper. Remember that in the ancient world, to be a physician was to be half scientist and half religious figure. Medicine was a matter of getting yourself right with the Gods as much as the right diet or exercise. So, for Luke there would always have been the rootage of medicine in the spiritual. (Its exclusion of the spirit is one of the downfalls of modern medicine. Because of this lack of a religious connection in modern medicine, I do think it has suffered in its ability to comprehend the human objects of its practice as wholes. You go to the hospital and, sometimes, I have the impression that the patient is a liver, or a set of eyes or a colon. The experience of illness in its meaning for the patient as a whole person is something we may not think about as much as we should. Just a sidelight.)

In today's collect we say, "Grant to us . . . the spirit to think and do always those things that are right." Notice that thinking and doing are joined. In Christianity the intellect is an instrument with which to achieve ethical action. In ordinary language, part of figuring out what to do is thinking about the situation. The implication is that we won't do what's right if we don't also seek to think what's right. In the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition we find that thinking what's right almost comes first. Look at the Ten Commandments. The first series has, partially, to do with what one thinks. "Don't have any God's but me." That's a matter of choosing this God and not any others. It requires thought to choose. It eventuates in action, "Don't bow down to them or worship them."

My favorite is "Honor your Father and your mother." And believe me, in the ancient world they were already asking, "What does that mean?" You've got to think about this because honoring and agreeing are not the same and to keep the commandment means recognizing the boundary – and that requires thinking.. They knew that in 500 B.C. The point here is that thinking and doing go together.

Then the collect says an interesting thing, "We, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will." Our existence is dependent upon God, but living that existence well is also dependent on him. Here, I think, we get a look at the foundation of what the Christian life is about. God does not withdraw the gift of being. Other people can take that gift away from you, but God does not withdraw it. If you look at the foundations of Christianity, you discover that Christianity is not just interested in overcoming people's tendency to behave badly, it's even more interested in overcoming the fact that we die. I refer you to Paul for whom the last enemy of God is death. In early Christianity the idea is not come to the Eucharist because when you come your kids will get a good moral training in Sunday School. And it's not come to the Eucharist so that you can be revved up to face the problems of the coming week in a quasi-Christian spirit.

No, in the early church we find this: "come to the Eucharist because it is the medicine of immortality. That's an exact rendering of the phrase they used. Come to the Eucharist because Eucharist is the gift of everlasting life.

I think we've abandoned that understanding, at least it's in second place. This collect does not put it in second place. It asserts that we cannot exist without God. It then goes on to say that what the Christian life is about is being enabled to exist according to God's will. And God wills everlasting life. To exist according to God's will takes us into realms beyond those of good behavior.

But what does that mean? And we fall into the trap of looking for formulae. We seek the religious equivalent of a five year plan. We seek points A, A sub 1, A sub 1 sub lower case a and so forth. You've all seen these things, beloved of bureaucrats and the darlings of officials high in the church. And they can be good things, but all such plans tend to detail what we are going to do. But to live according to God's will means what, according to today's gospel? "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." Living according to God's will is preparing oneself to accept the gift of the kingdom of God. I can't

help it, it seems to be staring at me off this page. To live according to God's will is to be willing to accept the gift. We model it for ourselves every Sunday, when we accept the gift of the Eucharist. Eucharist, after all, is not a ceremony in which we do everything for God. It is a ceremony in which, because we believe God to be faithful, we open ourselves to receiving from God, a gift.

This puts things in a slightly different light. The purse which doesn't wear out isn't, as one might think, some kind of meticulous obedience to rules. The purse which doesn't wear out is that attitude of thanksgiving and gratefulness for the gifts which we receive. I would suggest that the capacity to love others, which seems to be at the heart of the matter, is dependent on an awareness that one is loved. It's an uphill struggle to develop the ability to love others if you have not received consistent love yourself. That ability to receive the gift turns out to be central, key.

So don't confuse making purses for yourselves that don't wear out with collecting a batch of good deeds to be written in a heavenly book. I think that Luke is concerned about a relation with God that is real, and the real God is not a bean counter in the sky. Especially these days, we can make machines that do that. But no one has, yet, made a machine that can decide to give a gift or a machine that displays gratefulness for receiving one.

So the point to the Christian tradition is openness, the preparedness to receive a gift. That's key. Then, if we go on in the gospel we see this business about being dressed for action and having one's lamps lit and being like those who are waiting for the master to return from the banquet. We can get boggled up assuming that this applies to some sort of historical second coming. But it could just as well apply to a constant readiness and openness to accepting the gifts God gives. Be ready. You don't know when you are going to receive it. You don't know when it will show up in your life. And if you're not watchful, you might miss it – even if it's happening all the time.

The passage doesn't have to imply a second coming of Jesus that calls down the curtain on human history. The point to the story is made in what to the ancient world would have been a shocking role reversal. The master gets back home, finds his servants still alert. What does he do? He fastens his belt and has them sit down to eat. This is not the way things are supposed to happen. They, the servants, are supposed to be alert to take care of the master's needs. So the master, on arriving home, takes care of the servant's needs. This is a reversal. It's also why I think the passage is intended to talk about openness to receiving God's gifts. If we are open, we find ourselves served by God, which is certainly a reversal.

In one sense, that's all that needs to be said. In another, there is an additional practical thing worth a sentence or two. Sometimes God's gifts look pretty strange. It's hard to tell a gift from a problem. Most parents are aware of this, that the gift of children is just occasionally a bit problematic. Anyone who says, "My, aren't they wonderful" is someone for whom I find an itchy feeling in my hand – it wants to make a fist. Life can be built of gifts, but that doesn't mean they are easy things. Yet to try to build a life merely on what originates inside oneself is, perhaps, even harder and is certainly more lonely.

So practical piece of advice #1: prepare yourself for something more than the merely pleasant. Advice #2: God's gifts are frequently given over a long period of time. It's difficult to tell what a person means on first encounter. The first time Lucy and I encountered each other there were no sparks, there was no sudden spurt of passion, we did not fall in love at first sight. There was, in fact, an experience of mutual blandness. In assessing the value of a gift, one needs to move beyond first impressions. Sometimes that's hard. Suspended judgment is hard and suspended judgment can take intelligence. So we have returned to thinking again. To accept God's gifts sometimes requires enough intelligence to suspend judgment.

The point I'm trying to make is that to base our lives on receiving gifts is a fundamentally different attitude than to base them on planning what to do. Yet to receive gifts requires thought and intelligence, it requires care, it requires awareness. But it also requires an openness and generosity of spirit which is frequently lacking in the life lived according to a series of five year plans. A life built on receiving of gifts is, perhaps, harder than planning life out. Well, the Christian life isn't easy. In ordinary human terms, it's frequently not even successful. I'm irritated by churches which want to be successful. I find no statement in the gospel that the successful church is closer to God. Somehow, we've fallen for it. I think that's happened because the business about receiving gifts from God, being a center for the practice of receiving from God and the study of how to receive from God, has fallen out of the picture.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.