

Jubilee on the Way: Readings from Luke in the Season after Pentecost

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During the twenty-two weeks of ordinary time after Trinity Sunday and before observance of the Reign of Christ, all the lectionary gospel readings are from Luke. All but two of the Pentecost gospel readings take place after Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem and before he has arrived there. Half of the readings include at least one parable, and several either set the action at mealtime or picture Jesus offering advice related to table fellowship and hospitality. In the texts after Pentecost, then, Jesus is found walking, talking, and eating.

All of these actions are occasions for Jesus to announce and enact what he had spoken of at the synagogue in Nazareth. There Jesus had read a text from Isaiah proclaiming the Spirit upon the prophet to bring good news, freedom, healing, and “the acceptable year of the Lord.” After reading, Jesus commented, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).¹ The rest of the gospel offers one instance after another of that fulfillment. Jesus proclaims Jubilee and enacts it in the lives of the people he encounters.

On the Way to Jerusalem

A third of Luke’s Gospel is the story of a road trip. In the reading for the Third Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 9:51-63), Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, and then he takes nearly ten chapters to get there. Jerusalem is many things. It is the location of the temple, also known to Jesus as “my Father’s house” (cf. Luke 2:41-50). It is where his coming exodus, discussed with Moses and Elijah, will take place (cf. Luke 9:31). Outside Jerusalem, he will be hailed as “the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38). Days later, within the city, he will be the object of the mob’s shouts, “Crucify him!” (Luke 23:21). “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Jesus laments (Luke 13:34). Events on the way to Jerusalem unfold in the shadow of the rejection that awaits him there. Still, all along the way, Jesus lives and gives life to others. He enacts good news, freedom, healing, and Jubilee among those he meets.

Luke 9:51-62

We hear first of Jesus’ resolve to go to Jerusalem in the reading for the Third Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 9:51-62). The reading should perhaps begin at verse 49, which would add Luke’s account of the unknown exorcist and Jesus’ directive to the disciples, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you” (v. 50). The news that those who are not *with* the disciples may nonetheless be *for* them is helpful context for the two themes of the day’s gospel reading.

The first half of this reading is the scene in which Samaritans, who do not regard the Jerusalem temple as a worthy destination for worship, reject Jesus’ advance team because his face is set toward Jerusalem. Confronted with the Samaritans’ decision

to withhold hospitality, James and John propose a scorched-earth response. Jesus rebukes them. Had John remembered the unknown exorcist and the news that their circle of friends was wider than it sometimes appeared, the brothers may have been less offended by the a refusal of welcome.

The second half of the reading goes in a different direction. Just when we thought openness was the word for the day, Jesus goes on to dismiss would-be followers because their interest in discipleship is not sufficiently single-minded. One wishes first to bury his father; another wants to say farewell to his family. Both receive harsh sayings in response. Jesus is intense, apparently impatient for what is ahead on the road and in the city.

The two parts of the text force readers to hold two ideas together: (1) discipleship is a matter of urgency and resolute focus, *and* (2) the condemnation of those who do not sense that urgency or have that focus is not a disciple's work to do. Can followers of Jesus be fervent in our discipleship without an accompanying fervor to condemn those who reject the way of life we know?

Last year, one of the students at the seminary where I work went through a crisis related to her sense of call. The crisis began when she realized that if she were called to pastoral ministry, she would become pastor to at least some people whose worldview and politics she finds repugnant. What could prepare her for such sacrificial love? In the gospel reading from Luke 9, a closer walk with Jesus empowers a more (not less) generous spirit toward those with whom we share few convictions and experiences. The One we follow is not interested in rejecting those who offer offense. He will not be focused even on saving his own life. When his followers' most deeply cherished loves are rejected by others, vengeance is not a fitting response. In the reading for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Jesus will tell the disciples that the appropriate level of rebuke for those unreceptive to the good news is not fire from heaven but rather the shaking of dust from one's sandals. On the way with him, we are intense in our following and restrained in our rebuking.

Luke 10:38-42

At the beginning of Luke 10, Jesus sends out seventy people in pairs to offer peace, cure the sick, and announce that the reign of God has come near. At the end of Luke 10, in the gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Martha receives (*dekomai*) Jesus into her home. Warren Carter points out that all six uses of the verb *dekomai* in preceding chapters of Luke have to do with people's "openness to the word and work of God."² Martha's sister Mary is also present and listening (*akouō*) to Jesus. The verb *akouō* appears earlier in Luke 10 as the opposite of rejecting the word proclaimed by the 70 (cf. 10:16). These two women are followers of Jesus, receiving him and listening to his word.

Even as Martha welcomes Jesus, she is preoccupied by much *diakonia*.³ The story of Mary and Martha has often been preached as a rebuke from Jesus to busy women, especially women who are busy with the work of getting a meal on the table.⁴ A friend remembers her mother saying to her pastor father about this text, "Don't preach that story if you want Sunday dinner!" Holly E. Hearon notes, however, that the text nowhere mentions kitchens or meals, and she advises preachers, "Consider whether you would preach this text differently if the two characters were named Jake and Jeremy."⁵ If they had male names, the tradition might imagine Mary and Martha

were two of the seventy sent out ahead of Jesus. Could the *diakonia* in which Martha feels abandoned be the work for which the two women were commissioned in Luke 10:2?⁶

Warren Carter suggests that the text is instructing its readers in the central importance of partnership for Luke's understanding of discipleship and mission. Earlier in the chapter, the Samaritan of the parable exercised his devotion to God and neighbor in partnership with the innkeeper. Now Mary and Martha are in *diakonia* together, even when the road is bumpy, as it seems to be in this story. "As much as ministry or brokerage is commissioned *for* the service of another, it is carried out *with* others, as an act of partnership."⁷ The story is not a contrast between being a disciple (Mary) and being distracted (Martha). Rather, the story anticipates the word of Jesus in Luke 11:28 that discipleship includes both hearing (Mary) and doing (Martha) the word of God. Martha, "distracted from ministry's source" by ministry itself, is called back to that source by Jesus himself.⁸

Parables in Pentecost

Half of the gospel texts in Pentecost include at least one parable. Parables sneak up on their hearers, revealing insights that hearers could better resist if a speaker named them directly. Parables disorient in order to reorient. They lift hearers out of business as usual and set us down in a place that looks like Jubilee. Perhaps because disorientation is so uncomfortable, it is easy to turn parables into stories with a moral. The preacher sums up the sermon with a "we should" or a "let us," and everyone is immediately back on familiar ground. We have heard a sermon and now we know what to do. Yet a parable means not to tutor us so much as change us. Its aim is to orient us to the work of God in our midst.

Luke 16:1-13

A text helps to illustrate the point. One of the reasons the gospel for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 16:1-13) is difficult to preach is that it so thoroughly resists moralizing. In this parable, a thoroughly corrupt manager cheats his employer out of even more money after the manager learns he is being sacked, and in response, the employer *commends* the manager. How is this behavior commendable?

Both Luke and the lectionary situate the parable in such a way to lead hearers to a moral something like "The rich should not make an idol of their riches." Luke piles up several verses of Jesus' sayings related to faithfulness, money, and service, and closes the section with "You cannot serve God and wealth." The lectionary pairs this gospel reading with Amos 8:4-7, which addresses itself to those who trample on the needy and in which the Lord declares, "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

Certainly this "moral of the story" is true: indeed the rich should not make an idol of their wealth. God expects righteousness from God's people. God is angry whenever and wherever the rich are "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes" (Amos 4:6). Still, what does this moral have to do with the commendation of the manager in the parable? He is not generous, except with another's assets, and his generosity is motivated entirely by self-interest. He is no Robinhood, unconventionally redistributing wealth toward a more just society. He is a fellow who is too weak to dig and too ashamed to beg. Surely he is a negative example of morality, yet he is

commended by the one for whom he works. Why?

If the goal of a parable is to disorient us, this one is doing its job well. Daniel M. Bell, Jr. proposes a way forward. “As Jesus suggests in Luke 16, that lovely parable of the dishonest manager, wealth—mammon—is for making friends, for welcoming and being welcomed into the eternal homes. That is, it is for... renewing communion.”⁹ The dishonest manager recognizes that material goods are for drawing people together. Thus he is commendable in a way that most middle class Americans are not. To those who live in a culture where self-sufficiency is the highest value, the parable offers reorientation to the values of Jubilee. Communion, rather than self-sufficiency, is God’s aim for all that God has made. The goal of giving is not to offer others the minimum needed to mollify Amos’s God. (Would that be 2%? 10%? Is that off of gross or net?) The goal of giving is not to maintain our isolation from the needy and theirs from us. Jesus comes to give us back to God and to each other. The goal of giving—and the rest of life—is for travelers on the Way to connect, to be friends, to be together the body of Christ in the world.

Luke 16:19-31

As a storyteller, Jesus stands outside the parables he tells. At the same time, his life and ministry themselves exegete those parables. Helmut Thielicke, in his famous sermon on the first half of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24), concludes that the one who tells the story shows us the Father (cf. John 14:8-9), not only by speaking the parable but also by entering it. For Thielicke, Jesus is the Son who travels to the far country—the Word made flesh—not to squander all he has been given but to raise up a languishing humanity and welcome us again to our true home. Thielicke describes the speaker of the parable, saying, “He is not merely imagining a picture of an alleged heaven that is open to sinners; in him the kingdom is actually in the midst of us. Does he not eat with sinners? Does he not seek out the lost? Is he not with us when we die and leave all others behind? Is he not the light that shines in the darkness? Is he not the very voice of the Father’s heart that overtakes us in the far country and tells us that incredibly joyful news, ‘You can come home. Come home!’”¹⁰

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, assigned for the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, offers another example of a parable that Jesus tells and then exegetes with his life, death, and resurrection. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells a story in which things work out for a poor man and do not work out for someone who went through life rich. Telling a story about the reversal of fortune, Jesus is in the company of Hannah, Amos, Jeremiah, and his own mother, Mary. The world we know is unjust but is eventually set right as God vindicates those who suffered from the neglect or the exploitation of their neighbors.

At the end of the parable, the rich man attempts to strike a deal with Father Abraham. Couldn’t Lazarus be sent back to earthly life to warn the rich man’s brothers? It might be too late for him, the man reasons, but shouldn’t his brothers get the chance to repent? Abraham refuses. “They have Moses and the prophets,” he says. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:29-31). As far as Abraham is concerned, both the chasm between the rich man and Lazarus and the chasm between rich man’s insight in death and the thoughtlessness of his brothers in life are fixed and unbridged.

But Abraham is wrong about that. The gospel message is not “Just hold on until you die; then things will be better.” The gospel message is not “Dig a little deeper for the guy with the cardboard sign, or be prepared to suffer for eternity.” The gospel is that Jesus bridges chasms thought to be fixed and uncrossable, like the chasm between rich and poor, the chasm between sin and righteousness, and the chasm between death and life. The crucifixion is every bit as much a story of reversal as the story of the rich man and Lazarus, but in the story of the crucifixion, the dying one asks pardon for the executioners. Neither in life nor in death is Jesus ever as hopeless as Father Abraham about who can be changed. That is our hope.

At Table with the Lord

Luke offers more table scenes than any other gospel. Eating appears more often in the parables Luke includes than in those of Mark and Matthew, and Luke narrates Jesus sitting down to meals with a greater variety of people.¹¹ In the texts read during Pentecost, Jesus counsels the seventy twice to “eat what is set before you” when they are received by strangers (Luke 10:1-11; 16-20); the friend at midnight needs food for a guest (Luke 11:1-13); the rich fool speaks to his soul in splendid isolation, “relax, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:13-21); those servants who are awake when the master returns are treated to breakfast (Luke 12:49-56); and a group at table with Jesus receive lessons concerning where to sit as guests and whom to invite as hosts (Luke 14:1; 7-14). Throughout the gospel and Acts, food and table fellowship provide occasions for the work of Jesus and the Spirit to heal, teach, and expand the circle that encompasses God’s people.

Luke 19:1-10

Just a few miles outside Jerusalem, Jesus meets Zacchaeus, a tax collector who is short enough and possibly also unpopular enough that he cannot get to the front of the crowd. He climbs a tree to see Jesus. Jesus, who seemed at first to have been just passing through Jericho (cf. Luke 19:1), sees Zacchaeus and announces to the man, “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). The necessity of this visit, like other necessities in Luke, is communicated by the verb *dei*. In Luke 2, the boy Jesus had explained to his parents that he must be in his Father’s house. In Luke 9:22, Jesus confides to the disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” In Luke 13:16, divine necessity dictates that the woman who could not stand up straight must not suffer one more day but must be set free from her ailment on the sabbath. The father of the prodigal says to his elder son, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:32). This is the sort of requirement laid upon Jesus with respect to Zacchaeus: Jesus must be with him. That is all Zacchaeus needs to hear. He welcomes Jesus to his home, as Martha had welcomed Jesus to her home in Luke 10. Witnesses grumble that Jesus should keep better company, but neither Jesus nor Zacchaeus sees a problem.

In the company of Jesus, the tax collector is moved to announce a change to his household budget. As a parable can reorient us to the work of God in our midst, so can a visit from Jesus. Salvation, in the person of Jesus, comes to the house, and — look! — a camel makes his way through the eye of the needle (cf. Luke 18:25). Jubilee! Zacchaeus sees that he is connected to the poor, and he is ready to bring something to

the table in that relationship. Zacchaeus sees fraud where he had only seen his own “getting by” before, and he offers restitution. In response Jesus announces the point of his entire ministry, whether in Galilee, on the way to Jerusalem, or in the holy city: “The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). We give up on so many people, including sometimes ourselves. Jesus breaks bread with them, with us.

As the Pentecost season draws to a close, the church celebrates the Reign of Christ with a reading from the passion narrative, Luke 23:33-43. Jesus is no longer walking, speaking in parables, or breaking bread along the way. Here Christ reigns from a cross, and still he is enacting Jubilee. The scene includes two “last words” from Jesus that are unique to Luke. He asks for forgiveness for those killing him, and he befriends a thief crucified beside him. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” To be with Jesus along the way, even in the bleakest hour, is to know the Lord’s favor.

Notes

1 All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

2 Warren Carter, “Getting Martha out of the Kitchen: Luke 10:38-42 Again,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58:2 (1996), 268.

3 Cf. Holly E. Hearon, “Luke 10:38-42,” *Interpretation* 58/4 (Oct 2004): 393-395, “In Luke-Acts, [words in the cognate group of *diakonia*] are associated explicitly with table-service (4:39; 12:37; 17:8; 22:27a; Acts 6:1), financial or material support (Luke 8:3; 11:29), but also proclamation of the word (Acts 6:4) and ministry (Acts 1:17, 25; 12:25; 20:24; 21:19). The absence of any reference to a kitchen or a meal in Luke 10:38-42 leaves open the question of the source of Martha’s distraction. Some form of ministry, even proclamation of the word, is, at the very least, a possibility” (Hearon, 394-95).

4 Cf. Brendan Byrne, S.J., *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel*, second ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), “Martha has gone overboard in the duties of hospitality; she is busy about preparing many dishes when really only one is needed” (Kindle location 2103).

5 Holly E. Hearon, “Luke 10:38-42,” 393.

6 Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women Partners in the New Testament,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6:1 (Spring 1990), 65-86, posits that “the Martha and Mary behind the stories in Luke and John were a missionary *couple*, a pair like Paul and Sosthenes. As Paul designated himself as ‘apostle’ and Sosthenes ‘brother’ (*adelphos*; 1 Cor. 1:1), so Martha was designated as *diakonos* and Mary as ‘sister’ (*adelphē*)” (78).

7 Carter, “Getting Martha out of the Kitchen,” 276.

8 *Ibid.*, 279.

9 Daniel M. Bell, Jr., “The Story of Stuff (including the Stuff We are Made of) or Why We Have What We Have,” lecture at the 2022 Stewardship Symposium, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University, January 28, 2022. Video recording available at <https://youtu.be/YBpSG0dt-ZQ?t=3243>. See also, “In Praise of Dishonest Managers: The Economic Crisis in Light of Luke 16:19,” *The Other Journal* 17 (Feb 3, 2010), URL <https://theotherjournal.com/2010/02/03/in-praise-of-dishonest-managers-the-economic-crisis-in-light-of-luke-161-9/>, accessed February 4, 2022.

10 Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper, 1959), 29.

11 Luke is the only gospel, for instance, where Jesus is explicitly pictured accepting invitations to dine at the home of a Pharisee (cf. Luke 7:36-50; 11:37; 14:1-24).