

-There is this ride I remember riding at Valleyfair, the amusement park in MN I went to as a kid. It's called "the scrambler" and it's this crazy twisting, ferriswheel like, ride. You ride it and it stops for a few seconds at a time. Many times when it stops, you are towards the top of the ride and you get a couple of seconds of viewing across the park and it's really cool. But then, the ride kicks into gear and you "get scrambled" and then when you stop you are usually on the way bottom or upside down looking up! The whole point of the ride is that you never know where you are going to be when. Don't get too comfortable, because you are gonna get scrambled!

-In many ways, I feel like this parable of Jesus, the final one before we start the Season of Advent next week, scrambles things up.

-The reign of Christ. Tagline: what is up now is down, what is down now is up. I think this is really important in looking more deeply at this story.

- I remember my whole family while growing up being big *Home Improvement* fans. I have never seen my mom laugh so hard at a show. For those who don't know the show, the comedian Tim Allen plays a father and host of a "tool show" which always seems to get him into an accident of some kind. One episode that sticks out in my mind is the Thanksgiving episode where Tim gets so wrapped up in other things that he forgets to make time for his family. He learns his lesson, however, and I remember the last scene where he is serving Thanksgiving dinner with his sons and wife on either side down at the local homeless shelter. Family and charity always seem like good wrap up points for half-hour sitcom shows like this one.

-But is this where this parable ends, too? Is this what makes the sheep so great? They are able to be charitable to the sick and outcast? Maybe be able to take a tax deduction?

-I think if all we see out of this story of Jesus is Tim-the-toolman serving folks in need a Thanksgiving meal out of the goodness of his heart, we have missed something. But what? What point is Jesus making here?

-Perhaps we can find a clue in verse 40 which says: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Just as you did it.....to members of my family. The scrambler is in motion! It's not "just as you did it to some guy on the street" or "Just as you did it to one of your enemies". Instead, it's showing us a radical relationship that is easy to miss. The least of these are part of a family, God's family. The message here is much more about "building up the family"; "being in relationship", then it is "serving someone Thanksgiving dinner." Notice there is no mention of "you kicked me a coin on the street when I needed it." Instead, all of the things that are mentioned in this parable are relationship/family based.

- What does it mean to be in God's family?

-We had text study this last week discussing this parable and one of the other pastors said something really interesting to me: "We Lutherans don't have a lot of go-to

scripture verses. But maybe we should. If you ask me, this parable should be a go-to text for anyone proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's should be really a line-in-the-sand." I really agree with this statement because it's true, we Lutherans like our ambiguity and "grayness". We like our calling (as Luther puts it) to be "Kings/Queens of all AND servants of all" in Christ at the same time. But if you ask me, Jesus puts it out there in this parable pretty clearly with almost no ambiguity: welcome and love the least of these like they are family. Period.

-It's interesting to read other perspectives that seem to really struggle with this passage. I was reading one commentary which went on endlessly in trying to define what the "least of these meant". The argument that this person was trying to make was that the least of these are those who are "down and out with a heart that accepts Jesus." Now, that's interesting, because apart from a lot of personal disagreements I have with that position, I am most baffled by this argument because the actual scripture itself doesn't seem to support such a claim. I certainly don't see anything in the Greek that can be translated as: "I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me, and I was so thankful that you gave me a test of whether my heart was properly aligned with Jesus."

-Here's what is in the Greek: "'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' Isn't it interesting that BOTH the righteous and unrighteous were surprised by when they saw Christ. Both had no idea that Christ was there. How many times have we said or done something for someone that we only find out later was greatly impactful? I remember at my internship church, one woman was waiting for a test to come back to tell her if she had breast cancer. She wasn't comfortable in telling anyone at church, but you could see that she was anxious. I talked with her after worship and I barely even remember what I said. All I remember is giving her a hug. It turned out she did not have cancer, thank God. Several months later she sent me a huge thank you letter detailing how much she appreciated the words that I apparently said to her and the hug I gave her.

-Maybe the real challenging part of this parable isn't us serving the least-of-these, it's us realizing that all of us at some point ARE the least of these.

-It's been a really incredible week if you have paid attention to how many well-known men have been accused and admitted themselves to sexually harass women. 1 in 3 women, according to one study, have experienced sexual harassment within the workplace in some shape or form in this country. Women of all ages are finally feeling empowered to come out from the shadows and tell what has happened to them. For some, including multiple pastors, this movement needs to be discredited and the broad assertion that "all these women must be lying" needs to reign.

-This is where I think this text speaks really loudly. Because, if ALL of us are at some point the least of these and know what that feels like, then we all have the obligation to speak out for the least of these and against those that seek to define and limit where Christ exists.

-Perhaps this is a good example of where this parable can put the “scrambler” in motion. The Reign of Christ is not about keeping power, silencing accusers, or blasting the fake media. Instead, the Reign of Christ signals a radical lifting up of the oppressed, healing the wounded, and yes, welcoming all no matter who you are into Christ’s holy family. Period. No if’s, and’s, or but’s. That’s the “line in the sand’ as it were.

-Sure, we are not going to do it perfectly. Sure, we are going to fall short. But, these things should not keep us held back from trying our best to live a life loving the neighbor. Because we already know that perfect theology and perfect living as some preach is impossible. It’s only going to get scrambled. Jesus doesn’t expect perfection, but instead seeks radical living. How does our life make room for the surprise of Christ and love of the neighbor? May we all be surprised by where Christ exists and may this church have the courage to live deeper and witness the calling of the gospel. Amen.