

Sept. 1 2013 FPC Allegan Psalm 112 Luke 14: 1-14

August 28th, 2016 NKPC Psalm 112 Luke 14: 1, 7-14. Tweaked.

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched....

<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: <sup>8</sup> “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. <sup>9</sup> If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. <sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. <sup>11</sup> For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup> and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

In 1955, the Arabian Horse Association decided to have a horse show in Scottsdale, Arizona. Because Arizona had great weather during the slow season of the winter months, the show was slated for February, and at that first show in 1955, 50 Arabian horses showed up. There, on the

grounds of the spectacular Arizona Biltmore Hotel, the mares, stallions and foals were judged in various categories but always with an eye to their beauty and to how close the horses came to the judges idea of the perfect Arabian horse. Once the winning horses were declared, they immediately became more valuable and more sought after for breeding and passing their genetics on to other horses in the breed. Over the years, the Scottsdale Arabian Horseshow kept getting bigger. Currently over 2400 Arabian horses from around the world come to Scottsdale AZ to compete against each other at the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show.

The show has long left the hotel grounds and now takes place at the state of the art WestWorld a 132 acre horse show and multipurpose facility that is financially supported by the city of Scottsdale. With its nine beautiful arenas and new covered Equidome, the event organizers for 2013 show turned the ticketing over to Ticketmaster, who completely botched the job.

Traditionally, at horse shows, all tickets are general admission and the people who want good seats arrive early and then stay in them as long as they like before they move around to other open seats. The horse people are also used to being able to frequently leave their seats and to walk down to lean right up on the rail to get a closer look at a horse that

they are particularly interested in during the show. --Not aware of this culture, Ticketmaster assigned the first four rows closest to the rail to be the elite reserved seating, and placed all the non reserved general admission seats in the rows higher up behind them. The result of this situation was that once the horse show started, the high priced reserved seating very quickly became the worst seats in the house. Instead of being able to see the horses up close right on the other side of the fence, those who were sitting in the reserved seats were treated to an unobstructed view of the backsides of the trainers and owners and potential buyers who were willing to stand up along the rail to watch. Without ushers that were willing to enforce a change in this long standing culture of standing along the fence, those folks who had spent the big bucks to be treated as special and elite were forced to choose between trying to get a glimpse of a horse between the shifting bodies now standing right in front of them or to give up and move to the worst seats that were left over in the now filled up general admission section.

Doesn't everyone want to be treated special or to put ourselves first? In the grocery store, we walk a little bit faster to head toward the check out lines in order to get in front of that mom with her overflowing cart and three

squirming kids. We love it when our work is recognized with a raise or with an award, and we constantly are comparing our cars, our homes, our yards, our kids and our clothes with those of others. While some people may be shy and may not like to be singled out of the crowd, they still love to be considered the best or most accomplished and to be admired by others. Christians are no different from others in that regard. --All you need to do to find this out is to attend a gathering of pastors or church people comparing notes and listen for about 2 minutes to hear the comparisons begin.

"We had to bring in chairs for our Christmas Eve service," one pastor will say. "It was standing room only." "Our Christmas Eve service was acoustically amazing with our brand new sound system this year." "We enjoy worshipping in our new sanctuary." "We had 27 kids in our Vacation Bible School this summer." "We served 82 people at our Soup Kitchen this week."

Sometimes the comparisons are not so blatant, but more subtle: "We are starting a new children's choir this fall. Can anyone recommend a great kids Christmas program?" And sometimes the comments are so obscure that they are almost ridiculous. "If people from your church happen

to stop by our church next Tuesday, be sure to park on the street because we are getting the parking lot redone that day."

And even if things are not going so well and you can't think of anything new and wonderful happening at your church to brag about, there is always the tried and true strategy of complaining how bad things are and comparing how much you have to sacrifice just to keep things running. A sort of an odd sense of false humility over how much you have suffered for the sake of the gospel. "I am so tired. The church custodian quit and I had to clean the bathrooms and vacuum all the carpet in the sanctuary yesterday." "You think that is bad? Our church had 3 funerals last week and with four members in the hospital and our music director headed out of town, I have worked at least 80 hours this week, and while I was gone the dog ate something he shouldn't have and threw up all over my carpet. I had to scrub it out."

The point of our passage and our message today is to remind us how completely and totally ridiculous we can get when we strive so hard to be recognized as the best among others. Just like it would be ridiculous for us to assume that of course you are sitting at the head table for the wedding party when you are merely invited to the wedding, in the same way it is

ridiculous for us to strive for human recognition when the real person that we should be working to please is God.

In the 1980's when I was in my Baptist youth group, I heard about a youth director who took this idea and who radically put it into practice. He was tired of the entire scene where youth groups were requested to do some service work around the church for free, and the same tired old yard raking events and singing the same old carols at the nursing home year after year. So instead of planning youth events that would be applauded and commented on by the congregation, he instead came up with a plan to do something he called "Secret Service".

And so he got to work in planning this new way of doing things. --He took a big chunk of his annual youth budget and bought a old panel delivery truck. After helping the youth clean it all up, they painted the entire truck black both inside and out. At youth group, the kids would come up with an idea of a service project that they wanted to do. They were allowed to tell no one outside of the group. --They then had to plan and raise funds and implement the project without anyone knowing that they did it and without any recognition whatsoever. For their first secret service project, the youth planned to plant flowers outside some of their oldest members

homes. So they all dressed in black and met at 11 pm in the church parking lot. They loaded the flowers and their tools into the van and headed out into the night. That first night, their plans to do some service in secret were foiled by a police officer who pulled them over and interrogated them. After some fast talking by the youth director, he ultimately escorted them to the three senior citizens homes and watched them do their service in silence, but the flashing lights of his car in the other part of the neighborhood where the van was pulled over soon got the word out of exactly who it was who was responsible for the newly planted flowers.

Not to be deterred in their pursuit of doing good in secret, the youth director then changed the secrecy rules and called and notified the police department every time before the youth group headed out into the darkness. But their efforts met with mixed success. Frequently the youth were unable to discipline themselves to keep completely silent, and the homeowners would hear something and awaken to turn on the yard lights on the youth group trying to rake up leaves in the darkness or to trying to shovel snow without making scraping sounds.

And the youth proved to be really terrible at trying to keep their good services secret. --Someone who did the secret service would inevitably tell

their friends about how much fun it was to dress up in black and go out to do great things at night without getting caught. And there was more than one of the youth who could not resist smiling or giggling uncontrollably when asked about a particular secret service by someone who had received it.

Toward the end of the school year, when their panel truck broke down, the youth director abandoned the idea of the "Secret Service". But the story of this youth director and what he tried to teach his kids has remained a youth group legend. It is said that the kids who actually participated in these adventures never ever forgot it and also were much more acutely aware of just how much of what we do is done in order to receive the praise and the recognition of other people. --While we tell ourselves that we are doing things because we love Jesus and because we want to spread the love of God to the world, frequently we are all too ready to accept the praise and recognition that comes from a job well done.

In conclusion, our scripture passage today is a lesson about human nature and our constant wanting to be part of the special and the most elite. We love to be considered the best and most important person in the room. We want to have other people recognize our good work and to reward and

to praise us and award us with that ribbon for our first place and top champion efforts. But ultimately once our days here on earth are over, all of the human praises that we have gathered will mean nothing. The trophies will tarnish and chip, the ribbons will fade, and the next year a younger and stronger individual will take that honor and add their name to the long list of past winners.

Ultimately, the only work that really matters is the work that is done for Jesus. When we love God with all that we are. When we love the least of these who are here on earth, not for our own reward, but we love them as much as ourselves, it is those things that will be remembered and recognized by the God of the Universe at the end of all time. It is all those things, and not our trophies and faded ribbons that will matter. May it be so. Amen.