



September 2, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 14:1-14

“God’s Recycling Center”

Do you recycle? It seems like most people today do. Some of our younger church family members may not realize there was a time when people didn’t recycle—and when it was much less convenient to do so. You had to collect it all at home, and then cart it off to a center somewhere, on the days they were taking drop-offs. CURBSIDE recycling really started with my ministry 17 years ago. Before we moved to McHenry county in 1987, we had never seen those brightly colored plastic bins in people’s garages, and lined up by the curb on collection day.

It’s a great thing that we do. I’ve heard folks describe our Rummage Sales as a form of recycling, and the collection of goods that are sent to mission stations around the world are yet another kind of recycling.

This morning I’d like to propose that those forms of recycling are not the only kind—the recycling of physical goods. We are called to recycling in our spiritual lives as well. One Christian writer has actually described the church as “God’s Recycling Center”. What does he mean by this? Let’s examine Jesus’ parable from Luke for some insights.

First, remember that the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the _____. Right! The people. We are the church. We are people committed to living like Jesus did, and doing those things Jesus said people should do. So, what does he show and tell us through his actions and his words?

Let's picture the scene. Jesus is at the home of a Pharisee host who was fairly rich, and considered a citizen of significant social status. Banquets in such a home followed very clear patterns. People were there to be seen, as much as to see others, and they were expected to be involved in extended dialogues, speeches and so on. It's as if everyone invited was to be part of the "program", as we might call it at a church gathering.

Remember that this dinner party is taking place on the Sabbath. There were definite rules about what could happen on the Sabbath. In just a few verses of the Bible we see Jesus shattering convention by breaking Sabbath laws and the laws of social etiquette.

First, he heals a sick man on the Sabbath, which was defined as work, so it was disobeying the law of RESTING on Sabbath. Then he covers topics during his part of the dinner party's program that were not suitable for such speeches. He actually criticizes the rules for banquets themselves, giving new rules for hosts and guests—rules that we don't pay much attention to yet today.

The key for Jesus is GIVING without EXPECTING anything back. He's not just criticizing our dinner parties (although he does DO that!). Jesus is telling us to scrap the dynamic of GIVING in order to RECEIVE. He says, "Put your time, your energy, your money into concern and love for people who CANNOT return the favor." It's only when we do that, that we can be SURE we aren't expecting anything in return.

As I was mulling over this Scripture, I had a flash of insight as to WHY Jesus was stressing this point. It's because we ALL fall into that category with God. God has given us our lives, our bodies, our world, our universe. It's not like we can pay any of that back. His love, his grace that demands nothing in return, can never be returned to him in an equal portion. Since we can't give it back, Jesus tells us to pass it along. Pass along the grace. Pour it out for others. Don't hold any back. Don't pick and choose which people are worthy. Don't hold grace back on certain days or in certain circumstances. It's always the right time to love and love and love and care and care and care and do so unconditionally. The movie from a few years ago, Pay It Forward, offers an example of this kind of thinking. A young boy is challenged by a teacher to devise a way to CHANGE THE WORLD. He proposes a system, where a person, recognizing they have received something they didn't deserve, reaches out to another person who doesn't deserve it, to help them in some major way. They PAY FORWARD, rather than PAY BACK, the help and goodness they have received. It's a powerful movie—secular, but with a sacred message.

The Bible teaches us that we are only able to love because God first loved us. That's where the recycling center idea comes in. God pours out love, grace and forgiveness on us here. Then we recycle it—going out to share it with others. Do you see yourself receiving something here this morning that you can take to other people you encounter through the week? Has anyone here shared a comforting word with you? Has anyone shown genuine caring? Does the music speak to you of God's love for you? Does the cross remind you of the limits God will go to—for you, to claim you, to save you? Can you take some of that to other people?

We know we can be selfish with our physical stuff. We can be selfish with spiritual stuff too—piling it up; hoarding it. Here's a quote from Hannah Whitall Smith, who lived during the 1800's:

The ambition of many Christians is to have a vast number of things, and their energies are all wasted in the vain effort to get possession of these things. Some strive to get possession of certain "experiences"; some seek after "ecstatic feelings", some try to make themselves rich in theological "views" and "dogmas"; some store up a long list of works done and results achieved; some seek to acquire "illuminations", or to accumulate "gifts" and "graces". In short, all Christians, almost without exception, seek to possess a store of something or other, which they fancy will serve to recommend them to God and make them worthy of his love and care.

What a frenzy of wasted time and effort! We do not have to do anything to make ourselves worthy of God's love and care. (Actually, we **can't** do anything to make ourselves worthy of God's love and care.) God just loves us and cares about us. God can't do anything else--- he IS love, He IS grace.

Now hear this, friends, please hear this: THE CHURCH HAS BEEN CALLED INTO BEING BY CHRIST FOR THE PURPOSE OF RECYCLING THAT LOVE AND GRACE. There's nothing wrong with treasuring spiritual experiences, ecstatic feelings, gifts or graces. I do not believe Hannah Smith is saying that. She is saying they cannot be OURS--- POSSESSIONS. They are not given for that purpose and are not badges of how great or worthy we are. They are simply GIFTS. GIVEN by God, not to be hoarded but RECYCLED.

A parishioner in a former church I served had a wonderful practice—a concrete way she reached out, every single week, to offer love and grace to the children in her neighborhood. Every Saturday morning at 9:30 a.m. she put cookies out on a T.V. tray in her front yard and sat beside them in a lawn chair. In bad weather she sat in her garage. All the neighbors knew her well, and she let the families know

she'd be out there. The cookies were for the neighbor kids, who soon learned of her practice and showed up without fail. In addition to offering cookies, this widowed mother of grown children, with several grandchildren, offered her friendship and helpful listening ears and heart to the children who lived nearby. It seems like a very small thing, but I know it wasn't. It made a huge difference in the lives of the families on her street—and in the hearts of those kids.

You were made to be an Instrument of Divine Grace. Sounds pretty fancy--- like something far beyond our abilities, right? But it isn't. You're really a spiritual Recycling Bin--- bright blue or yellow, maybe a little grubby on the inside in spots, but holding items that can be passed along and of benefit to someone else---- on and on down the road beyond where you can even see. It's an honorable and worthy calling. Will you make it yours?

(Point out the grubby recycling bins at each exit—encourage folks to drop any paper they don't want into them on their way out. Like them- we are grubby on the inside, but still useful and needed !