LinkedIn is a business oriented social networking website, a place where people go to find people in their line of work, to connect with people they may have graduated from school with or worked with at some time, or to browse job openings in their field. It's kind of like Facebook for the business world. I joined LinkedIn a number of years ago when someone I knew from the past sent me a connection request. I don't go on the website very much any more but I do glance at their emails from time to time to see if I might have a message from someone I know. This week, I received a LinkedIn email, whose subject I had not seen before. The From line read “LinkedIn Salary” and the Subject line was “Linda Mitchell (my maiden name) compare your salary to other pastors.” When I clicked on the “Get Started” button, I saw I could “Get the full salary picture, view compensation breakdown for your role, and more.” For fun, I clicked on to the next page, which asked me to put down my salary, then add on any extras like sign-on bonus, sales commissions, tips or profit-sharing. It would be very interesting to meet a pastor who has any of those.

Numbers. They are how we rank ourselves against others or how we quantify how we feel about ourselves. Against others: Salary. Money in the bank. Degrees after one's name. Sign-on bonus, sales commissions and profit-sharing. Square footage of one's house.

How we feel about ourselves: Pounds on the scale. Number of electronic devices one owns. Number of friends on Facebook. Age or lines on one's face. Pairs of shoes one owns, or clothes in the closet or \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(fill in the blank with what matters to you.)

Numbers. They are just units of measure, yet we assign much importance to them. We use numbers to order ourselves, to value ourselves and de-value others, to elevate ourselves over others who need to know their place. And this is what it all comes down to in our society: making sure everyone knows his or her place and does not try to rise above it (falling below is not quite so threatening). This status-quo philosophy has its own numbers attached. When women accept that their salaries will always be 79% of men's and that there are only so many positions or professions open to them, the numbers will put everyone in their place. When minorities accept that non-Hispanic whites constitute 62% of the U.S. population and we tailor our governmental policies to keep that number where it is, the numbers will put everyone in their place. When we in this country see no problem in the top 10% of Americans holding 76% of the country's wealth, in everyone else in the top 50% of the population holding 23% of the wealth, leaving the bottom 50% holding 1% of our nation's wealth, the numbers will have put everyone in their place.

We are forever sizing ourselves and others up according to our real or perceived value. It all means so much to us and it means nothing to Jesus. Jesus once went to a meal at the home of a Pharisee, a man who was a leader of the Pharisees and considered a man of high stature. Jesus noticed that some of the guests at the meal took the best seats at the table. No doubt they thought they deserved these seats because of their perceived value in their society. Jesus believed such behavior warranted a parable.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host,” Jesus told the dinner guests. “How embarrassed would you be if the host who invited both of you came and said to you, ‘Give this person your place.' and then in disgrace you would have to take the lowest place?” Then Jesus said, “But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.”

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. However, we should be warned that Jesus knows the difference between false and true humility. False humility would be this: *OK, Jesus, I'll take the lower seat because it makes me look humble and gives some poor slob a chance to see how the elite live. But you and I know, Jesus, that I really deserve that place at the table.* True humility would be the same person saying this: *Wow, Jesus. You really don't care about my station in life, who I am, what I make, who I know. You love me, sure, but you really do love those other people, the ones I sometimes look down on. You love them as much as you love me*.

In Jesus' kingdom, we don't live our lives constantly trying to get ahead of others. We don't give things to others knowing that one day they will return the favor. We give to others knowing that everything we have is a gift from God, given not to increase our bank accounts but to enable us to share God's love with another. This crazy jockeying for position we do? This taking from one so another can get ahead? This constant pushing down of another race, gender, ethnic group, minority? These are not in God's plan for us. God's plan moves us to stop counting, arranging, comparing. God calls us to empty ourselves, that we may be filled with God's love and grace to share with those who so need them. The author of 1 John puts it this way, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” It's hard to reach out a hand to a neighbor when we are afraid of dropping all that we are holding onto.

There's more. Jesus, who emptied himself for us, who used his power to help the most needy, who gave his life that we might have new life in his name - Jesus allowed himself to become the lowest of the low. When we serve those who most need Jesus' care, we serve Jesus. According the Rule of Saint Benedict: “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, 'I came as a guest and you received me.' And to all let due honor be shown...In reception of the poor and of pilgrims the greatest care and solicitude should be shown, because it is especially in them that Christ is received.”

Jesus told the dinner guests that evening to give up the quid pro quo kind of thinking that is so prevalent in our world. He told them not to invite to a banquet people who could invite them back or do them a favor in return, but to invite those who had nothing to give in return, for that kind of invitation bears witness to the selfless heart of Jesus. Since we are on the other side of the resurrection from the guests at the dinner table with Jesus the evening that Luke writes about, you and I are the recipients of Jesus' then yet now promises. We are told of a marvelous kingdom in which Jesus will reign forever, a place where rich and poor, women and men and people of all nationalities and skin color will live in harmony, none valued more than another, all living in the truth of Jesus' love, poured out equally for all. Most of us long for the day when we will take our place in that exquisite kingdom, where the sins of racism and sexism and demonization of the poor are no more. But rather than have us just pray and hope for that day, the risen Christ brings his resurrection power to the here and now, calling us to stop our counting and our ranking and our rationalizing. Jesus calls us to open wide the door to his kingdom and welcome all those we and others have shut out for so long. We do not do this to win any favor from Jesus, but because Jesus welcomes us all, sinners and sinned-upon and his exquisite kingdom starts right here, right now.

Amen.

*Pentecost 15C*

*August 28, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 14:1, 7-14*