
Borders of Promise

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 12-13, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

When you entered this space, the first thing that might have struck you is seeing some classmates you thought would never graduate. A second thing you may have noticed are the beautiful stained glass windows or the high vaulted ceilings. You may not have noticed a green devil in one of the stained-glass windows or the two wooden mice that are in residence in this building or even the video cameras. The cameras are running, which might make you reconsider falling asleep. They watch us from the margins of this iconic building. They are not front and center; they are on the borders, and we might not even notice that they are there. They pay attention to us, but do we pay attention to them?

Margins, borders, matter. In a 2016 Olympic tennis match, Jack Sock was playing Lleyton Hewitt. Hewitt served the ball and the umpire called it out. It was so close that to Sock it looked in, so in an unusual fashion, Sock told Hewitt to challenge the call. You can see the chair umpire looking at Sock as if he was crazy and thinking, “What the...?”; you can hear the audience chuckling in surprise. They can’t believe what’s happening. The umpire reviewed the call and the ball was shown to hit the line thus it was actually in, giving Hewitt a point. Sock risked losing a point in order to be just. He chose to go against the grain and investigate what happened on the line, on the margins, and not ignore what happened there, because just as in tennis, what happens on the margins, on the borderlines of society, matter. It can change the game. And it can change your life. If we neglect the margins, we won’t see the full picture. Margins matter in tennis and even around dinner tables.

We often find Jesus around a table because he was an ancient foodie (7:33). He’d love the new West Union building with all of the eating options, especially the Indian food at Tandoor. At a last supper with his disciples he even told them that he wanted to be remembered by a meal—“Do this in remembrance of me.” And in today’s story, he’s going to eat a meal, then tells a parable about a meal, and then another story about another meal. But what’s telling about Jesus is not the actual meal but who is at the meal. He eats with religious leaders but when he moves beyond his respected acquaintances, he raises eyebrows. “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (5:30). That’s like asking, “Why are you hanging out with the Tarheels?” He gets critiqued for how he minds the margins because as the saying goes, “Show us who you eat with, [and] I’ll tell you who you are.”

At the table, Jesus gives two instructions. The first is “... when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Humility gets a bad rap in our day, I know. “Are you kidding me? This was not my approach to getting into Duke or being hired at a consulting firm or winning this fellowship—I wasn’t chosen because I was humble.” None of us get a job offer because we’re humble! On the contrary, you get accepted or are chosen for boasting about your achievements, demonstrating how gifted you are, how much you did in the community, how you excelled in the classroom or on the field, what you created and now have a patent for. Am I right? Think about the Duke-Carolina

rivalry. What do Duke fans say to their Tarheel opponents, even if we lose? “That’s alright, that’s okay, you will work for us some day!” Not much humility there.

What Jesus teaches goes against the Duke grain. “Go and sit down at the lowest place”? Who would boast, “I’m a marginal reader, choose me!” No one wants to be marginal. You want to be the best, extraordinary movers and shakers in the world.

The London Underground, also known as “the Tube,” is the oldest rapid transit system in the world. In 1968, a recorded voice was installed to warn travelers to watch out for the space between the platform and train, every time the train stops. That voice says, “Mind the gap.” Mind the gap because if you don’t you may fall and hurt yourself. In life, if you don’t mind the margins you may fall because the margins or the fringes shouldn’t be ignored. It’s not just those who are honored who deserve a better seat around the table of humanity but those who are dishonored on a daily basis. If we don’t mind the margins, mind the social gaps, we miss the collective picture of humanity.

“Go and sit down at the lowest place”? Go and see what it’s like to feel what others feel on the borderlands of human existence, to increase your empathy with those who always have to sit or be told to sit at the lowest place. Put yourself in someone else’s shoes to see the world from another perspective. Mind the margins.

Inhabit the lowly places because they are actually central to society. Talk of borders has been in the news a lot and borders in life or on a page are significant. There was a president of a major research university, who shall not be named (but he’s an English buff), and he appeared on The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert. They discussed the American Academy of Arts and Sciences report on the importance of the humanities and social sciences in education. At one point, Colbert picked up the report and pointed to the size of the margins on each page and challenged the President by claiming he was stretching the report, making it longer with bigger margins (I know none of us have ever done that!). Colbert claimed that if the margins weren’t so large, the report, which is about 88 pages long, would only be 8 pages long. But swiftly and wittily, the President responded by saying, “All serious readers know that margins are to keep your notes in.” This president was none other than President Brodhead and I think he deserves some snaps of affirmation for that response! The margins on a page are a part of the reader’s experience, a part of the full page.

When we read a book, we may use the margins to emphasize what’s important to us as readers. “We have all,” in the words of former U. S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins,

*... seized the white perimeter as our own
and reached for a pen if only to show
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
we pressed a thought into the wayside,
planted an impression along the verge...*

The margins can have lasting impressions on the borders of a book and a society.

But some may never pay attention to the borders, especially the footnotes or endnotes, those notes on the margins of a page, because they are in smaller font, revealing somehow that they may not be as important as the “main text.” When writing books, editors may even encourage writers to limit

the number of footnotes because what's in the margins seemingly don't matter and are viewed as getting in the way of the reader, breaking the flow. But the irony is that the footnotes tell you the source for the information in the main text; they feed into what is central and tell you where to go for the source of knowledge. Without the footnotes, without the margins, you wouldn't have all of the necessary information at hand. You wouldn't have the whole story because without the fringe of a page or a community, you can't see the whole and know the fullness of God.

The marginal information is sometimes commentary on the main body of the text. The margins matter and maybe it's the margins that tell us what kind of society this really is. The margins tell us who Jesus was because the marginalized were Jesus's tribe. He hung out with the least, the last, and the left out which is why his second instruction is, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..." (14:12-14)

Invite those who aren't connected to power. Invite those who can never repay you. Be careful of befriending others just because you can get something from them but aren't really interested in them. Invite those who can't give you anything but themselves—they have no money, their health is bad, they are reliant on you, they are not the right network or don't have the right net worth. Invite those who aren't your usual associates. Engage those who are different. And by doing so, by inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, those without college degrees and with great material and physical needs, you are telling them, "You are accepted" (Paul Tillich).

Whether it be where you sit or whom you invite, the message is clear, class of 2017—embrace places and people out of the normative cultural bounds. Choose the margins, the unacceptable, the periphery, the unpopular. If you want to be first, be last. Go against the grain and choose the lowly seat and invite the outcasts because God wants to broaden your relational borders.

Choose the way that won't win you any awards or honorable mentions. Choose the way that may reward you with a burden or just make you a footnote. Choose what you really don't want in order to receive what you really need. Don't worry about seeking greatness; seek humility. I know it gets a bad rap. But if you want to be great, be great in service. Do you want to be great? Be great in loving your neighbor or roommate who snores all night long. Do you want to be great? Be great in respecting the one who cleans bathrooms and sweeps floors and serves food in the student center and had to clean up after you on LDOC. Do you want to be great? Be great in complimenting someone else, be great in loving, be great in listening, be great in giving and perhaps even post-graduation you'll receive a PhD in love. Do you want to be great? Mind the margins. Pay attention to what and who is on the border for we need them if we want to see the whole picture of life and experience the beloved community of God.

Our destinies are intertwined, and without those on the margins—refugees, strangers, immigrants, widows, orphans, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, the most vulnerable among us—our future will be anorexic and the dream of a beloved community will die.

But I still hold fast to that border-crossing dream captured in the words of the sonnet, "The New Colossus," inscribed on a plaque on the inner wall of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, the "Mother of Exiles":

*From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome...
Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!* (Emma Lazarus)

In other words, to channel wanna be President Kanye West: “I’m just trying to say the way school need teachers/The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that’s the way” we need the fringes. We need each other as the promise of our future is the expansion of our heart’s borders. And maybe, just maybe, we’ll see that borders aren’t actually dangerous but sites of hope where the dream of God can come true. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it. See you at the border.