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## Fringe Faith

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 28, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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A refugee Olympics team. Debates over whether a 400m female runner could actually dive across the finish line to win a gold medal. Video images of Olympic swimmers causing disturbance at a Rio gas station; they should've known that nothing is secret in this surveillance culture. We have our own Chapel cameras on right now filming this service, which might make you reconsider falling asleep. One wrestler biting another wrestler's forearm in a match as if it were an ancient gladiator battle. What else would you suspect from a summer Olympics but drama?

One memorable scene in Olympic tennis stands out. Jack Sock, United States tennis player ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world, was competing against Australian tennis player Lleyton Hewitt. Hewitt served the ball and the umpire called it out. It was so close and to Sock it looked in, so in an unusual fashion and with admirable sportsmanship, Sock told Hewitt to challenge the call. You can see the chair umpire looking at Sock as if he was crazy and you can hear the audience chuckling in surprise. They can't believe what's happening. The umpires do the review and the ball was shown to hit the line thus 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, matter. It can change the game. Margins matter in tennis, in writing, in life, even at dinner tables.

Jesus was a foodie (7:33). Jesus would love the new West Union with all of the eating options. He loved eating with people. One of his last deeds was a last supper with his disciples. And he wanted to be remembered by a meal—"do this in remembrance of me." Consistently in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is at a table. In our story, he's going to eat a meal and then tells a parable about a meal and then another story about another meal. I'm convinced that Jesus would love Durham, voted the South's tastiest town by *Southern Living* magazine. Of course, Jesus blessed food (9:16; 22:19) and prayed for it (11:3). But what's telling about Jesus is with whom he breaks bread. He eats with Pharisees (7:36) as is clear by our story and that's really no surprise, but it's who else he associates with that raises eyebrows and questions and draws complaints—the Pharisees and scribes complain to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (5:30). Why are you hanging out with the Tarheels? He gets critiqued for how he minds the margins. Those on the periphery are central to his mission and table fellowship was a sign of acceptance and community; it told us who was in and out. "Show us who you eat with, I'll tell you who you are."

Jesus isn't as interested in the type of food on the table as he is in who is around the table with him and where they sit. Where you sat at banquets in that day was an indication of your social status. All eyes were on Jesus—"they were watching him closely" because they wanted to keep him close enough to kill him. According to ancient historian, Josephus, "the Pharisees [had] the masses as allies" (*Antiquities*) so when Jesus begins to go against the religious grain and the social status quo, he goes against the masses and sides with those on the margins, on the fringe. In fact, Jesus chooses the margins, chooses the lowly places and lowly people.

His first instruction is to choose the lowest place. "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." Humility gets a bad wrap in our day. "Are you kidding me, Jesus? This is not how I got into Duke—I wasn't chosen because I was humble. I had to do my best PR to get accepted." None of us get a job offer because we're

humble! I don't know of any incoming undergraduate or graduate students who got into Duke for being humble. On the contrary, you get in for boasting about your achievements, demonstrating how gifted and smart you are, how much you did in the community, how you excelled in the classroom, what you created and now have a patent for. What Jesus teaches goes against the Duke grain. Am I right? Think about the Duke-UNC-Chapel Hill rivalry and what do Duke fans say to their Tarheel opponent, even if there is a loss—"That's alright that's okay you will work for us some day!" That's not nice. Not much humility there.

"Go and sit down at the lowest place." Choose the margins, choose the humble spot. This is antithetical to how students get into Duke. This year's incoming class includes former student body presidents, one of five high school students chosen to be an ambassador to the Japanese government, a competitive hula dancer, and a student inducted into the Ghanaian house of chiefs. Duke students aren't looking for the lowest place on the margins. "I'm a marginal reader, choose me for the class of 2020!" No one wants to be a marginal student. You want to be the best, extraordinary, the top of the class. "Go and sit down at the lowest place"? Yes. 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, to learn what it feels like to be marginalized or dishonored or ignored or minoritized. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. Mind the margins because if the truth be told, there will always be those above you and those below you in some way. Eat humble pie in the seats of the margins and see the world differently, from another perspective and view because your location in the world affects how you see the world. "Go and sit down at the lowest place." Choose the fringe.

"Do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host..." Jesus wants us to eat lots of humble pie by recognizing, though we may not want to hear it, that there are those who are more distinguished than us, more gifted, more talented, more intelligent. Choose the lowest place. Mind the margins because the margins matter and what happens on the margins can change a tennis game or change your life.

In London, the subway system, 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 travellers 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 the spiritual life, if you don't mind the margins you may fall in your faith because the margins or the fringes shouldn't be ignored. It's not just about those who are honored or praised 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 are not minding the teaching of Jesus nor Jesus himself.

Choose to inhabit the margins or the lowly places because it's actually central to the gospel. When we read a book, we may write in the margins and make notes, highlighting something we read to get our attention the next time we pick up the book. We use the margins to emphasize what is important from our reading. In the same way, the marginalized reveal what is important in the gospel. You look in those liminal spaces to learn what Jesus wants to highlight because much of his ministry takes place on the margins. When we read a book, some may never read 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 or the real content. 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 what is on the fringe of a page or a people, you can't see the whole and know the fullness of God and the gospel.

The margins matter because when Jesus is challenged about his eating buddies, he's clear to tell his critics that the sick need a physician. "I didn't come for those who are well and well-fed." I came for the hungry, the naked, and the prisoner. I came for the fringe folk. Elite religious individuals may not like this but authentic followers of Jesus will understand because from its inception Christianity was a fringe faith. It was not a religion of the state. It was not popular. Christians were on the margins, on the fringe, meeting in homes, receiving threats against their lives, and becoming martyrs. The Apostle Paul reminds us "not many [Christians] were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world..." (1 Cor 1). God chose the low and the lowly and got in trouble for it. Early Christians were anti-empire realizing that pledging allegiance to a civic flag was not the same as pledging allegiance to God. Jesus was not a national hero; Jesus was seen as a nut claiming to be the Messiah, the Lord, over against the Roman emperors. He operated on the fringe over against a national civic religion of economic progress, which is why Jesus can't be found in a painted body of red, white and blue, running a multimillion dollar television ministry with golden keys to a ten bedroom mansion, driving a Mercedes Benz, and flying to do ministry on a Learjet. This is not what he died for as a marginalized man.

Jesus was always with the fringe figures in society. His second instruction to the one who had invited him 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, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (14:12-14)

Invite those who aren't connected to power. Invite those who can never repay you. Invite those who are dependent like the man with dropsy whom Jesus healed. Be careful of befriending others just because you can get something from them but aren't really interested in them, only satisfying your self-interest. 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, and the blind, you are telling them what theologian Paul Tillich preached years ago—"You are accepted."

Whether it be where you sit or whom you invite, the message is clear—choose places and people out of the normative religious or cultural bounds on the borders. Choose the margins. Choose the unacceptable. Choose the risky. Choose the periphery. Choose the unpopular because by doing so you are choosing the kingdom of God. Jesus isn't really talking about table manners but about the kingdom of God where we will feast at a wedding banquet and where the values are different. Jesus doesn't promote family values. Jesus promotes kingdom values. Choosing the kingdom of God is the inversion of our normative thinking because if you want to be first, be last. And when you're weak then you are strong. In this kingdom, you go against the grain and choose the lowly seat and invite the outcasts. It is this holy inversion that calls us to conversion everyday, to turn to God in order to turn our way of thinking and acting to be more loving, merciful, and just.

Go low then you will go high. Choose the least and then you will be great. Choose the way that won't win you any awards or honorable mentions. Choose the way that may reward you with a cross because this way is the way of Jesus. He's serving humble pie at his table. 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 wrap. 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. Do you want to be great? Be great in serving the one who cleans bathrooms and sweeps floors and serves food in the student center. 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 when

you graduate from Duke maybe you'll also have a PhD in love, grace, kindness, and humility. Do you want to be great? Fellowship on the fringe.

You might say that no one in his or her right mind would choose to be last or just a footnote, but it's not about a right mind; it's about having the mind of Christ—

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross” (Phil 2)

The way of humility is the way of Christ, the pathway to a fringe faith.

So when you choose the margins, you choose Jesus, because it's in the lowly, broken, frail and weak places and people you will find Jesus standing with open arms. He came into the world as “an infant lowly.” He lived as a vagrant who had nowhere to lay his head. He died on the fringe of society like a common criminal on a cross and was buried in a borrowed tomb. This is our fringe God and if you want to follow him, you'll have to go where he goes, away from the dominant norm to the borders of promise. Will you go? Then go low.