

*Living in Reverse©***Luke 14:1, 7-14****August 28, 2016****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

The church I served back in Kansas, before coming here to Holly, had a television ministry. Our services were videotaped each Sunday and were shown on the local cable station on Thursday evenings. It wasn't unusual for strangers to come up to me in the grocery store and tell me they knew who I was because they watched our service. Many of them, although they attended a different church on Sunday (or no church at all) would say they were "Thursday night Presbyterians.)

So, it was in that way that Nano came to know who I was and decided she wanted to be friends with me. Nano was a woman who had some physical and slight mental challenges but was pretty high functioning. She had a job with Skil – an organization that helped people like her get jobs and make their way in life to the best of their abilities.

Nano came to church one day saying she had been watching me on television and she had decided she wanted to come to church and to get to know me. She had walked the three blocks there from her apartment. Three blocks doesn't sound like much to many of us, but for Nano, who was quite a bit overweight and had serious issues with her legs and feet, three blocks seemed like a long ways.

But still she came. And she came back. And she kept coming. And she would hug me a little tighter than I was comfortable with and would put her head on my shoulder and tell me she loved me.

She heard me say once in a sermon that I loved the name Grace and felt that perhaps, if God renamed me, my name would be Grace – because, after all, God has had to give me so much grace!

So, Nano started calling me Gracie. And I teased her and called her Nano Nano. She asked if I would have lunch with her someday, and so we went. All around us were business people – those who were on their lunch breaks, chatting politely, laughing at jokes, sharing in their common ideas and work.

Nano was sitting across from me, food on her face and down her shirt. But the look on her face of sheer joy that we were having lunch made me feel two things: I felt glad I was there with her; honored, in fact, that she chose me to be friends with. And I felt ashamed that I noticed the food on her face and shirt – and the other things that made me uncomfortable.

I discovered a gift she had for using words and phrases. Nano had a poetic way of using metaphors. She was quite a good writer and she would write things and send them to me to read. I encouraged to share them, which she did, in the newspaper. I wish I still had some of her work to share with you.

The friendship I had with Nano was a lesson in humility. She was the one to instigate our friendship. Otherwise, I wonder – would I have had taken the initiative? Or would I have just been friendly but continued to stick close to my usual friends? If I had not made the effort to spend time with Nano, I would have surely missed some of the greatest blessings of my life.

Jesus is always challenging us to do things in reverse of what society tells us to do, right? *The last shall be first; the first shall be last. Those who want to be great will be the least and those who are the least will be great in the Kingdom of God. Anyone who is as humble as a little child will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* (Mark 9:33-37; Mark 10:43; Matthew 18:4; Matthew 19:30)

Jesus teaches a lot about being humble. In Luke 14 he tells about how people should do the opposite of what society does. When you plan a dinner, don't invite all your friends who are well off like you are. When you do that, they will then do the same and invite you, and in doing so, they will pay you back.

He says instead, invite people who are poor, or blind, or lame. Invite those who cannot pay you back. And in doing that, you will be blessed.

I love to have dinner with my friends. And we often do take turns paying for the meal or inviting each other to dinner. And I don't think that is so much the issue here. At least, I don't think there is a sense of being obligated to repay someone who is a friend. Among my friends, anyway. I hope.

But in Jesus' day, and probably still today in some circumstances, there is this thing called *honor*. Having honor was a big deal in Jesus' day. People made it a priority to show honor, and to have honor. If you didn't invite certain people you would lose your honor - or show disrespect to them. And if you were invited to a dinner and then didn't return the favor, you – and your family – lost honor – which was a very big deal in the community.

It could be a real big thing to “keep up with Jones's” as the saying goes. I think that is part of what Jesus is talking about. He is teaching humility here.

He says when you go to a banquet, don't take the higher place of honor. You might just be embarrassed as someone more important than you comes along and the host has to ask you to get up and move to the lower place at the table. Instead, start there and maybe you will be asked to move up.

The thing with my relationship with Nano, though, was that I had to be willing to let go of all my need of keeping appearances up. I had to be willing to let her be my host at times – paying for the meal; buying me a gift.

It was such a blessing in so many ways, being friends with Nano.

You see, I think there will be many Nano's in the final great Kingdom of God. They will be sitting in the places of honor. They will given the best seats at the table. They will be dancing and praising and singing for joy.

I think our little practice of worshipping in reverse this morning is just a small, joyful taste of the great reversal we will see in God's Kingdom. Jesus came to turn our thinking and our way of living upside down, inside out, and completely in reverse.

Remember Mary's song, when she found out she was expecting God's Son and she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth?

*46 And Mary said,
 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant....
 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.'* (Luke 1:46-48;51-53)

And in Jesus' sermon on the plains, he said:

*'Blessed are you who are poor,
 for yours is the kingdom of God.
 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
 for you will be filled.
 'Blessed are you who weep now,
 for you will laugh.*

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; (Luke 6:20-23)

Jesus said *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* (Mark 1:15)

Kingdom living – even now, while we wait for the final great Kingdom of God – means living in reverse.