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**Luke 14:1, 7-14; Psalm 81:1, 10-16**

## THE FINEST WHEAT

I begin this morning with a photo. It shows two little eight year old boys from Wichita, Kansas. Each is dressed in khaki pants or shorts and a bright red polo shirt, and they are wearing school backpacks. It's their first day of the new school year and they are standing with other classmates waiting to enter the building. But what is special about this photo is that it shows the little boy on the right, whose name interestingly enough is Christian, holding his classmate's hand as the other little boy cries. Christian's mother posted this photo on Facebook, stating that Christian saw the other boy "balled up into a corner, crying, so he went to console him, grabbed his hand and walked him inside of the school."

It is a beautiful picture of a beautiful boy doing a beautiful thing. Children sometimes possess a readiness to offer help and express kindness in ways that adults are sometimes inhibited from doing. Maybe they haven't yet been taught to ignore the sufferings of others or to look out just for themselves.

But we don't want to sentimentalize children. Because sometimes children can indeed be very cruel. Children can be very hurtful to one another, say unkind things, exclude one another, ridicule children who are different, bully others, and leave emotional and psychological scars on their peers that can last a lifetime. The little boy who is crying in this picture knows the reality of that all too well. His mother saw this photo and she wrote back on Facebook to Christian's mother: "Tell your son I said thank you so very much! That little boy he helped is my son and he is autistic. I worry every day that he is going to be bullied for being different and your son just

absolutely warmed my heart. If there were more children like him I wouldn't worry about such things."

This photo and the story behind it are very touching. It is such a small, simple moment on the grand scale of things, and yet it reveals all that is good in this world. We can see such tenderness and sweetness in this photo. The uninhibited kindness some children display is indeed very beautiful.

Today I want you to look at this photo of Christian holding his crying classmate's hand and I want you to see yourself in Christian. The way our hearts are warmed by this photo, the sweetness it stirs in our hearts, the joy we feel witnessing this act of kindness, this is what God sees and feels about *you*, every time you act in love and compassion and inclusion of others. God sees and takes joy in what a beautiful child *you* are.

When we claim that all people are created in the image of God, we really mean that we are created to reveal God's beautiful nature toward one another. But this nature needs to be nurtured within us if it is to develop. I would imagine that there is someone in Christian's life who has nurtured the kindness we see him display toward his classmate. That is what we believe Jesus does for us. Jesus came to nurture us, to teach us, to guide us in the ways we can be God's beautiful people who do beautiful things.

Today we heard a story about Jesus going to a dinner party among people who had forgotten how to be beautiful. Ironically, these people were surrounded by beautiful things. These were society's wealthier people--the host who was a leader of the Pharisees and his guests. The house would have been large and well decorated. The food would be of high quality. The guests would have come from the same socio-economic level as the host and would have been dressed in nice clothes. They would have been surrounded by beautiful things all the while they

had forgotten how to be beautiful themselves. These were not necessarily "bad" people. We have no reason to believe they were murderers or liars or cheats. They were society's respectable people, probably a lot like us. Along the way in life, they had begun to feel entitled to their status in society. They may have learned to blame those who were weaker or vulnerable in society, regarding them as responsible for their own problems. The host of this dinner and his guests would have learned how to guard their possessions and their wealth and their status in society. They lived in a world that was very hierarchical, with a rigid social structure that ensured some were on the top while others remained on the bottom. And it was a society that was rooted in a system of reciprocity--meaning, you did things for those who could return the favor. And since the poor, the sick, the disabled were at the very bottom of the social structure, and since they were often regarded as people whose misfortunes were a sign of God's displeasure, and since they were people who could never in a million years repay any gestures of generosity or kindness, why then, there was no point whatsoever for the host or his dinner party guests to include such people in their lives.

Somehow Jesus gets invited to this dinner party and he uses this opportunity to nurture in the people gathered there a new awareness of what it means to be God's beautiful people. First Jesus offers some words directed at the guests. He sees the guests jockeying for the best seats and he gives them instructions that sound a lot like an etiquette lesson. Jesus says, "When you are invited to a banquet, don't try to score the best seat, in case the host should come along and make you move. How embarrassing would that be! Instead, find a less honorable seat and then how much more will be your honor if your host should invite you to move to a better seat." This may sound like good etiquette advice but Jesus was really offering a lesson to expand their hearts

in the idea of humility. Humility is grounded in the idea that you are not better than others or greater than others, but that you regard yourself as one in communion with your peers.

After this lesson about humility, Jesus next offers a lesson about inclusion which is directed at the host. "When you give a luncheon or dinner party, don't invite your friends or colleagues or rich relatives knowing that they will invite you in return. But instead, 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."

It must have been astonishing for those at the dinner part to hear this lesson in radical inclusion that defied all their social norms. Why on earth would they invite such people to their events when it would no doubt jeopardize their standing in society? But Jesus wasn't giving lessons in how to secure one's social status. He was giving lessons in how to live as one of God's beautiful children. God's beautiful children are humble. God's beautiful children include those in need, and those who are excluded, and those who are vulnerable.

That's what Christian is doing here for his classmate. Christian is not only displaying kindness, he is demonstrating a quality of his own heart. When he took his classmate's hand, he demonstrated humility by showing that he stood not apart from or above his classmate but stood *with* his classmate. When he led him into the school building, he demonstrated a spirit of inclusion--that there was a place in the community for his more vulnerable classmate.

Christian's mother posted this photo on Facebook because she was proud of her son. She wrote, "It is an honor to raise such a loving, compassionate child! He's a kid with a Big heart, the first day of school started off right." Imagine the joy and the pride God has in you every time you demonstrate kindness, compassion, inclusion, humility, and when witnessing your gestures of love how God might also proclaim, "This day started off right!"

We know that what we feed children matters to their long-term health. A sustained diet of junk food will lead to health problems. But feed children good nourishing foods and they will have a strong chance to know good health. That is what Jesus tries to do at this dinner party. There, surrounded by platters of rich delicacies, Jesus tries to feed God's beloved children a far better food--God's nourishing food that will sustain them and enable them to live as God's beautiful people. We can see from this photo that someone has been feeding Christian just such a diet of the most important foods.

That is what God offers every one of us--only the best foods that will enable us to become God's beautiful people. In Psalm 81 God longs for the people to follow God's ways. God says to the people, "I would feed you with the finest of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." As if we were little children sitting in our high chairs waiting for our mother to spoon in the food, God says in this psalm, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it."

Here at this Table is where God offers us today the finest of wheat, not just *any* food, but the very *best* food. This is where we are nourished with Jesus himself, the finest of wheat. It is this food, what Jesus teaches us about love, compassion, kindness, humility, and inclusion that will enable us to grow into God's beautiful people.