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**Sunday 28 August 2022 to Sunday 4 September 2022**

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Sunday 28 August 2022

# At the table

by Dianne Eckermann

**For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 14:11).**

Read Luke 14:1,7–14

Throughout his ministry, Jesus dined with many different people in various places. Jesus ate with a tax collector and a Pharisee, as in the reading today. He fed a crowd with a couple of fish and some loaves of bread and dined with his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. He attended wedding feasts and ate more privately with his disciples at the Last Supper.

These settings have one common feature: Jesus uses these mealtimes to teach others. When he went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, we are told that he was carefully watched. Perhaps some of the other guests were interested in seeing where it was that Jesus chose to sit at the table. However, Jesus also observed that guests picked seats of honour at the table. Jesus chose this moment to talk about humility.

Our modern society generally sets little store by where we sit at a dinner table, so we are unlikely to suffer the humiliation of being moved to a less important place. However, Jesus’ words still hold a message for today, encouraging us to not overestimate our own importance but humbly accept who we are, and we know we are beloved children of God.

While Jesus understands the social hierarchy of his time, in the second part of this reading, he encourages his host to consider those in greatest need, the poor or those with disabilities, and invite them to dine. Unlike close friends and relatives, it is unlikely they can return the favour; however, humbly inviting them will provide happiness for those in need as well as their host.

This is exactly how God receives us. We will never be able to repay the grace and mercy offered to us. Humbly and thankfully, we accept.

**Heavenly Father, we humbly thank you for the way in which you know us in all our imperfections yet receive us as your children. Amen.**

Dianne has worked in varying roles in Lutheran schools and is currently Director of Leadership at Lutheran Education Australia. She lives in the Adelaide Hills with her husband Rob, two dogs, and several kangaroos who visit regularly. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, the company of her children and grandchildren and walking along the River Torrens Linear Park Trail.

Monday 29 August 2022

# A time to listen

by Dianne Eckermann

**But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward (Jeremiah 7:24).**

Read Jeremiah 7:21–27

Recently I watched a mother explain to her very young son why his behaviour of hitting another small child and running away across a busy road was dangerous. She told him how he had hurt others and how he could also hurt himself. At the end of her explanation, she asked if he understood. With all the stubbornness a three-year-old could muster, he angrily said ‘No!’. At that point, nothing more could be said to such a determined and headstrong little boy. He was refusing to listen.

Jeremiah would undoubtedly identify with this parent. Jeremiah was accustomed to the negativity of his people when he tried to tell them what God wanted. He knew they would not listen or pay attention to God. They would not even answer, but still, Jeremiah persisted.

Jeremiah lived in very turbulent times and saw Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians. He tried his best to communicate God’s anger to people who rejected his message and also rejected God. While the people rebelled against and rejected God, it was not God who had changed but the rebellious people. This passage might sound like a lot of Old Testament law as God asks for obedience. There is even a note of despair, ‘They went backward, not forward’. Even so, God remains attentive to the needs of the people, even when they are no longer attentive to him.

Just like the mother of the young boy knew that she had to talk to him to keep him safe, God persisted in sending Jeremiah to people, even though he knew they would stubbornly refuse to listen or pay attention. Despite this attitude – an attitude that in many ways can be seen in our current time – God’s love for his people continues always, and all we need to do is listen.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many messages you give us through your word and ask that you help us listen to your truth. Amen.**

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Tuesday 30 August 2022

# Our powerful refuge

by Dianne Eckermann

**The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him (Nahum 1:7).**

Read Nahum 1:5–9

I have only once experienced an earthquake, although I did not instantly realise what was happening. It was an unusual sound, like an extraordinary wind rushing in from nowhere, which was the first sign. Then the house began to creak rather alarmingly as the earth moved powerfully beneath us. The power of the earthquake and our powerlessness as it unfolded were both disconcerting once we realised what was happening.

Nahum begins this prophecy about the downfall of the seemingly invincible Nineveh with a description of the power of God over the natural world. It is God who can make the mountains quake or melt away. It is the power of God that can shatter rocks.

Having established just how powerful God is, Nahum also explains the caring nature of God. God is a God of refuge who cares for those who trust in him. God cares because he knows us; we know we can find shelter and refuge in him. Nahum shows that the power of God over nature means that God is also a powerful refuge.

After beginning this passage with a description of God as a powerful God, before moving to God as a refuge and comfort, Nahum then warns that God has the power to end Nineveh. Does this mean God is changeable? Not at all. God has always been powerful. He has always cared. Nineveh had been warned previously by Jonah that the city needed to change its ways or it would be destroyed, and for a time, they did change before reverting to the behaviour that separated them from God. It is not God who changes. It is people who lose their trust and people whose arrogance separates them from God’s care and comfort. This was true of the people in Nineveh; it has been true throughout history, just as it is true of people today. Our comfort is that God is always a good refuge in times of trouble.

**Heavenly Father, in this ever-changing world, we thank you for your enduring care for us and the comfort we have in you. May our trust in you always remain. Amen.**

Wednesday 31 August 2022

# Understanding mercy

by Dianne Eckermann

**They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them (Matthew 23:4).**

Read Matthew 23:1–12

Schools are great places for lots of rules. Rules apply to what time you arrive and leave and what you can and cannot wear. There are rules for the playground and rules for the classroom. Clearly, there needs to be some sort of order so that students can learn, but sometimes it might feel as if schools exist almost solely to ensure students learn to follow the rules, such as learning how to wear uniforms correctly. Any other learning is almost incidental. However, some families struggle to provide the correct uniform or other school essentials. Such a proliferation of rules means that schooling for those families can be a burden, which is not always recognised.

At the beginning of today’s reading, Jesus tells his followers that the Pharisees really know Jewish law, and it is important to do everything they say. Unfortunately, though, these knowledgeable people do not feel the law applies to them. Laws exist for others to follow, even if it creates a burden for them. It is all law and no mercy. In addition, they enjoy being seen as important people in places of honour and importance, more important than those around them. It was all about looking good in the eyes of others, not about their relationship with God. The hypocrisy of appearing to be one thing while actually being the opposite is not difficult to see in Matthew’s account.

If we look honestly at our society and our own behaviour, we may not find much is different. It’s easy to condemn the Pharisees, but it is not so easy to hold a mirror up to our own prejudices against those who are different and those who don’t meet our high standards. It is quite uncomfortable to realise that from the time they start school, some children learn they are not as important as others. Humbly looking to God and showing acceptance of all is one way of easing the cumbersome load of those in need.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the great mercy you show us. Help us to also show compassion to those in need in your name. Amen.**

Thursday 1 September 2022

# All things to all people

by Dianne Eckermann

**I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:22b,23a).**

Read 1 Corinthians 9:11–23

Recently I was reading a job description for a school principal. It ran for several pages. Just one dot point proved the impossibility of the job: ‘liaise with all staff (teaching and non-teaching), parents, students and the wider community including the church’. Imagine how many different points of view there are in that particular group and how hard it would be to meet all of their needs. Just one minor incident might upset a child, annoy a teacher, anger a parent, infuriate social media and lead to questions about how it was dealt with by the local congregation.

When St Paul wrote to the people of Corinth, he was keenly aware of how many different groups of people with competing beliefs existed in the busy port of Corinth. This included people from different cultures, people who held different religious views, people who were free and people who were slaves, people who were transient and those who were permanent inhabitants of the city. So when Paul talks about becoming all things to all people, he is not boasting about his abilities but about the necessity to be able to communicate with widely differing groups with one key aim: to share the gospel so that some may be saved.

Paul knew his audience. He knew that Corinth was a difficult place to preach to people about the unity of all under God. Whether they were Jew or Gentile, under the law or outside the law, strong or weak, knew the gospel or were unaware, Paul’s desire to share the good news of Jesus led him to do his best to understand the city and meet people where they were. He was not always successful in this, but he never failed in preaching the gospel to all people under all circumstances.

Our world today feels increasingly divided. We have the technology to share the wonderful message of salvation through Jesus. But too often, we use that very technology to scornfully dismiss the views of others and create division. It might not be possible to be all things to all people, but we can treat all people as if they mattered as much to us as they do to God.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love and for showing us how much we matter to you. Help us share your love with others so they too may know how much you care for all people. Amen.**

Friday 2 September 2022

# Freedom to love and serve

by Dianne Eckermann

**You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather, serve one another humbly in love (Galatians 5:13).**

Read Galatians 5:1,4–6,13–15

These seven selected verses in today’s passage from Galatians 5 share the words free, freedom and love seven times in total before ending with a warning about the consequences of misusing the freedom we have through God’s love.

The number of times the words freedom and love are mentioned suggests a strong correlation between the two. Paul explains freedom not as an opportunity for self-indulgence but as an opportunity for service to others through love. This seems counterintuitive to our world where the phrase, ‘I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else’, is an excuse for behaviour that does not care about others, nor does it demonstrate what it is truly like to be free.

Paul emphasises the freedom we all receive through Christ. This freedom is contrasted with those who believe they can be justified through keeping the law, a belief that leads to a life lived without Christ. While the law has its place in showing the will of God, it is faith working through love that sets us free from the pride and self-centredness that would otherwise separate us from God. Freedom is to live a life of faith, working through love and serving others, just as Jesus lived and died for all people.

Living without love, Paul warns, is to live a destructive life where no-one is left unscathed. I recall a documentary about walruses fighting each other with all the power and devastation that sharp-tusked creatures who weigh 1.5 tons can throw at each other. At the end of the battle between the two males, both were left seriously injured. Neither could be called a winner. In the same way, if we do not care for others, we are in danger of a similar outcome.

Humbly serving those who are our neighbours is all the law we need.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit coming to us and blessing us with the freedom to love and serve our neighbours. Amen.**

Saturday 3 September 2022

# Planted by streams of water

by Dianne Eckermann

**That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:3).**

Read Psalm 1

There is a poem called ‘Trees’ by Joyce Kilmer, which ends with the line, ‘But only God can make a tree’. Trees are apparently the most frequently mentioned living things in the Bible and are used either literally or symbolically in many different ways. Central to Psalm 1 is the image of a tree planted by streams of water. It grows because of life-giving water and being planted in just the right place. Its roots reach down so that it is firmly grounded, and its leaves, therefore, never wither.

A shady tree planted by streams is just what dreams are made of in a hot Australian summer. This tree, however, has not just prospered out of nowhere, nor does it exist just to provide shade. It symbolises a person who has studied and grown to know and delight in the teaching of God. It represents a person who, according to the words of the text, prospers in whatever they do. This does not mean prosperity in the way the world might view it. It does not mean getting whatever you want that looks good in the eyes of the world. It means being connected to God through learning about God. It is connected to the water, so often seen as life-giving, but perhaps in this context, it represents learning that flows from God.

Psalm 1 offers us two choices: to thrive like the tree planted by the stream or be blown away like worthless chaff. It is tempting in our society to want to have it both ways –sit with the scoffers and stand firmly grounded by the stream. The fear of missing out even has its own acronym – FOMO – because it is so tempting to see what others are experiencing just in case it is better than what we already know. There is, however, only one choice – to ground ourselves in God’s word and thrive through this connection. This is true prosperity.

**We thank you, Heavenly Father, for the waters of learning that flow from you. We ask you to help us thrive in the knowledge of all you have done and continue to do for each of us. Amen.**

Sunday 4 September 2022

# Consider the cost

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:33).**

Read Luke 14:25–33

He can’t really mean that, can he? Give up everything? Hate your family? Maybe he’s exaggerating to make a point. We do that, don’t we? Read the words of Jesus and whittle them down so that they are words with which we can be more comfortable. It’s clear that Jesus is saying that disciples of his need to know what they are in for. Like a builder before building or a king going into battle, understand what you’re in for before you start. Consider the cost.

One thing we know about Jesus is that he asks us many times to consider what’s really important to us. If it’s something other than being a disciple and gets in the way and takes precedence over following him, then put it aside. It’s like having a bruise. Jesus gently touches the bruise, the sore spot. He knows what it is and challenges us to identify it too. What is it that we hold so tightly that we are not prepared to let go of? It could even be life itself! Nothing should be first above following him. Nothing, which is emphasised by asking us to give up everything.

So that gives cause for reflection, doesn’t it? We shouldn’t shy away from what Jesus says. But one thing we should know is that Jesus doesn’t ask something of us and then say, ‘Okay then, all the best. Leave you to it!’ There is joy in following him. There is a peace unlike anything else that flows into us when we follow. He walks in front to show the way, alongside us to be a fellow traveller with us, and behind us to see when we fall so that he can pick us up again. There have been those who say, ‘trust me’, and it’s dangerous to take them at their word. But when Jesus says it, you can count on it absolutely.

**Jesus, you’ve found my sore spot, and it hurts. Help me sort out the first-things-first issue and discover the joy of discipleship that costs. Amen.**

Jim Strelan is a retired pastor who lives in Brisbane, Queensland. He has worked in Papua New Guinea, two Lutheran colleges and two suburban congregations, both with schools. He has three children and seven grandchildren and loves them all unconditionally. His passion is to share the gospel in ways that are as clear and simple as possible.