

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

The Line

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 1, 2013
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 14:1,7-1*

I like roller coasters. I like to go fast. I like to fall. I like to go upside down. But mostly I like to fly, at least in the way that the roller coaster makes me feel like I'm flying, high above the earth, with the help of all that steel and engineering, I'm flying in the heavens.

Unfortunately, for the two to three minutes of sheer elation that the ride gives me, there is a cost. I have to wait. I have to wait in a long line of people. I must wait with all those who share my desire to fly in the heavens. And this can be thousands of people. People from all walks of life. All directed by our handlers to wind through closely packed serpentine rows that loop back on one another like some diagram of the small intestine. Some of the parks have actually built entire buildings, entire complexes of these lines, demanding such patience. Our handlers know how frustrating it can be. And so they have designed these line buildings to entertain us. They have thematic interior design, the Batman ride's line looks like a comic book industrial section of Gotham city. They have displays for you to read, little videos for you to watch. They try to make it fun. Maybe the Department of Motor Vehicles should take notes! But no matter how much they try to gussy it up, waiting in line for hours is not fun. But this is the arrangement. Two hours in hell for two minutes in the heavens!

But what happens when a band of teenagers decide to break these rules? Under the chains, brazen and bold, they cut the line! They cut the line. You can feel the seething anger in the air. The fury at the injustice of it all! "Someone should tell the authorities. Someone should do something. They've cut in line, don't you see?" And maybe the teens are caught. Maybe they are sent back to the end of the line. Maybe there is a fight and they are kicked out of the park, never to return. But if something isn't done, the injustice just tightens everything up, and it is waiting for a release.

Here's where it gets complicated. Some people hold places for their friends in the line. They do this. You know you've seen it. Maybe they hold it for a boyfriend or a family member. And because they are in the line, their friend gets to wind their way across the lines, under the chains, and take their place beside the person who was "holding" a place for them. Now you know that "holding" is just an exalted form of "cutting." Honestly. But nobody ever argues with it. They may resent it, but they don't say anything. Who knows, they might want to "hold" a place for their friend someday. But if everyone were to "hold" a place for a friend, it would be a mess. Who would count as a friend? How many people can you hold a place for? The line could double in length. But still the practice holds, because the person who cuts in line has a defender in the one who holds the place. The one who cuts in line has a patron.

So much of society is not that much different than a line for a roller coaster. We wait in certain other sorts of lines for the benefits that society has to give us, whether it is education, career, family respect, prestige, these lines in which people are ranked and filed are so pervasive that it is shuddering to think about how much our systems of ambition, our negotiating with those around us, our scraping and striving and hustling, how much we actively wait in line for some goal, some prize, some honor. But while we are waiting, how many of us are clear on whether or not the prize is worth all the wait?

Jesus goes to dinner, a nice, religious dinner led by committed religious people. And he observed how even there, at a relaxed party among people who are trying to serve God, who are trying to seek heaven, they are getting caught up in who has the best seat in the house. Who does the host like the best? Who does the host think should be seated next to Jesus? Who is seated closest to the door? And so Jesus, Here's a tip. Don't sit in the seat above your station in life. Because then you'll be shamed and moved down. Sit in a place that is beneath you, like sitting among the children and

then people will say, “You shouldn’t be sitting there, come sit with us!” You use the system of glory and shame, reputation and scandal, you transform its power. The place of shame becomes an occasion for your glory. Neat, isn’t it!

But Jesus doesn’t stop at pointing out this clever dynamic to navigate high society. He starts to talk about a kind of way of life that goes above and beyond. Not just thinking about your place in line, or where your place at the table is located, and ways to curry favor with those who can get you ahead. He would rather have us start acting in ways that are really quite a liability, if we are going to seek honor and glory. He calls us to invite the people to our parties and dinners who are likely to drag us down, by most people’s standards.

“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.”

We are meant, not to pursue the favor of those who can get us something. We are meant, actually, to pursue the favor of those who actually will cost us something. We are to be, not the sycophants, but the patron’s, in any way we can. We have our place in line. In some ways, God gave us that place and in other ways other people gave us that place. What would happen if we shifted our life from seeking to get further up the line to actually holding the place in the world’s line for others, making a space for others, especially for those who most would rather languish at the back of the line in obscurity. What would happen to our lives if we made a space for this true giving? What an adventure it would be! This true imitation of God the true giver. I don’t know how much it would help us in navigating high society. But, in holding a place for the lowly in our lives, a higher society is ours instead, the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

But if I had to guess where Jesus would be in that line to the great roller coaster in the sky, imagine he’d be the caboose, right at the end, cordially allowing people to go ahead of him. The euphoria of the ride is nice, but there is something so powerful about letting people go ahead. The reactions of people to true generosity. Their surprise. And the thing about that prize, the ride, is that it only lasts for a few minutes. But the letting people ahead of you, the joy of that, why that never ends! And I imagine some people would join Jesus in this, too. Realizing that this is so much better than the roller coaster. The world is just full of people to let go ahead of you. Its an inexhaustible way of life. An eternal one. I doubt that Jesus or his friends would ever make it to the heavenly heights of that roller coaster, for there would be so much to do on earth, so much of heaven to be found at the back of the line.