



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 2, 2012

"Grasp Loosely vs. Grab Tightly" (Gospel of Luke Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

One day our Lord Jesus went to a party at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. It was kind of risky as the Pharisees were His enemies. They were all watching Him to see how He would behave during this Sabbath dinner.

It was probably a big feast—a feast to the eyes with all the decorations, and a feast for the stomach with all the food. Imagine the dinner venue. It was customary to have long tables that might have been joined to form a square. They were low-lying tables, like those in some Japanese restaurants today. The Middle Eastern custom was to recline at the table with face toward the food and with feet stretched out back. And certainly no one there would be saying, "H-M-S-A" to welcome you.

Part of the Middle Eastern culture both then and now is for the host to sit at the table in a central spot where he could visit with as many people as possible and, like a loving hen watching her chicks, make sure all were served enough food and drink, and that all were engaged in interesting conversation.

As the host took his honored position, Jesus noticed a most peculiar thing that maybe made Him break out into a smile and then maybe a slight but all-so-perceptible shaking of the head in disbelief or disgust, with a slight rolling of eyes. Here is what He saw: the guests were jockeying for position to sit near the host, for the most important seat of all

in most cultures (including ours) is to sit at the right hand of the host—the most honored position of all!

After watching guests try to slide in to that choice seat, if you can believe it. Jesus maybe cleared His throat and spoke to all of the guests about it. I wish I were there. He broke out into a story, a parable. Here is our Bible passage for today. Luke 14, beginning with verse 7.

Luke 14:7 When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

Luke 14:8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;

Luke 14:9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

Luke 14:10 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.

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

Well, that probably dampened the party a little bit. Wait till I give part

two to this story the next time I preach. If you think this is bad, you should hear how Jesus really zings the host in my next sermon.

But let's delve into this passage for today. We must first ask – what kind of person would forcibly and ambitiously try to position himself or herself at the place of honor at a party? Was it like musical chairs, where a guest tried to move in and sit down before others got there?

If you were there, can you imagine people trying to butt in, so to speak, and move people aside so that they could get to that spot? "Excuse me, excuse me. Hey look over there. Whoops, sorry you need to find another seat!"

It takes strategy and moxie and chutzpah! This is far bolder than those who jockey for position in the line on a Black Friday to get some deal at a store. This is far more strategic than someone trying to outbid someone on eBay. This is like someone who cuts in line to get to the blessings before others. Yes, it's that bad! I hate people who cut in line, as people have done to me at Disneyland, the so-called happiest place on earth.

In fact, I have seen more family fights at Disneyland than any other place. Truly. These are arguments between families on issues like who reserved the place first to sit and watch the Electrical Light Parade or the Fantasmic water light show.

I have seen families scowling, yelling at each other, and getting edgy and hot because they claimed they were sitting there first. They have had their legs stretched out to save places for other family members who had not arrived yet so that they could see Tinker Bell fly over the Sleeping Beauty Castle before the fireworks show.

Kids are tired and screaming; parents are trying to placate and please them while at the same time defending their turf from other families. Tired, hot, irritable, families confronting other families. Disneyland, the happiest place on earth. Actually, I do love Disneyland and would still go there if asked.

Going back to our Bible story, Jesus chose that dinner party at that moment to tell a story about humility—not happiness—but humility after seeing people jockey for position at the head table.

He pointed out the dilemma, the embarrassment that if you, an undistinguished guest, annex the honored place at the party, and then a truly more distinguished guest arrives, you will be told to move out, step down, and slide away to make room for the more honored guest. How humiliating that would be!

It will be far better that you choose a lower place and then the host says, “You there! Come on up and sit next to me!” Then you are blown away with such an unexpected honor.

Some of you have heard me tell this story before, but it fits so well here that I share it again. Years ago, I was asked to give a prayer at the retirement ceremony of Admiral Joseph Prueher, who worshipped here at First Prez with his wife Suzanne. Admiral Prueher later became the Ambassador of China.

Retirement ceremonies are always a big deal in the military, but the retirement ceremony after 35 years of

service of a four-star admiral is really a big deal, especially when you are the head of the Pacific Command, the largest geographic command on the planet earth—from the Western United States to the Indian Ocean. Admiral Prueher was in charge of all of our armed forces of land, air, and sea!

The retirement ceremony playbook for the retirement ceremony was six inches thick. Everything was laid out in exact detail of what was going to happen, who was involved when and where, how the men were to hold their swords, when to shoot the artillery in a salute, where the service men and women were to stand, where the band plays from, and when and what it plays when each guest arrives on stage.

I was on the main platform, but my seat was twelve feet back, way behind the front single line of chairs that were to seat the honored dignitaries of the day.

The ceremony began and one by one dignitaries walked on stage. There was, among others, the incoming Pacific Commander, Admiral Dennis Blair, then there was Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen, then there was Senator Daniel Inouye, today arguably the most powerful man in the Senate.

Finally, the man of the hour, the man who was being honored that day before hundreds of men and women standing at attention before many other generals and admirals, Admiral Joseph Prueher, stepped up to the stage. He looked great in his dress whites. He looked very smart with his cap, his glistening sword, and his white gloves.

They piped him to come up on the platform. The band played the ruffles and flourishes. Admiral Prueher

walked on stage. He looked fantastic! A knight in shining armor!

Then he looked at me and saw me standing at attention at my seat in the back of the stage, and then it happened! He broke protocol. He went against the rules. He countered what was expected of him. It was the day music stopped. And my heart stopped, too.

Instead of going to his seat at the front of the stage, Admiral Prueher slowly walked over to me in the back of the stage and said, “That’s not right.” And then he picked up my chair. And I thought, “What did I do wrong? I am going to die. They are going to shoot me.”

He carried my chair to the front line of chairs and plopped it down next to Senator Daniel Inouye, and then Admiral Prueher said to me, “You sit here.” And what do you say to a four-star admiral but, “Yes, Sir!” as I walked over to my chair at its new spot.

Then everyone sat down, and Senator Dan Inouye glanced over at me with a look as if to say, “There goes the neighborhood.”

When Jesus says it is far better to sit in the lower seat and then have the honored host ask you to go up to the higher seat, let me tell you today loud and clear that Jesus is right! It is a great feeling to be told by the host to sit up at the place of honor!

Jesus is saying we all, including you and me, should always be humble enough to think that we should always take the lower seat. We don’t deserve honor. We don’t deserve the best seats in the house. And if you have access to nice parties, nice food, and being honored, know deep in your heart that it is all by grace. We don’t deserve it. If we get to sit at the front of the stage, near the person of honor, know that it’s a blessing from God. It’s not something you grab and hold tightly.

Never live a life where we think we are entitled to something and where we deserve our blessings. Those who think they deserve the good things of life, actually become very negative when things don't go their way.

Every scrap of happiness in this crazy, sinful world, every morsel of blessing, and every good fortune when things go our way are all acts of grace. Any acclaim we get, we are lucky to get (no, it's more than luck) is a blessing directed by God. It's not something we were owed or deserve. If we live that way, we will live a far happier, fulfilled, grateful life.

My son, Dylan, has a friend named Jacob whom Dylan says is always so grateful. He's known him since high school days. With any meal put before him, Jacob would say, "This is the greatest food! So delicious." He stands out among others as one who is always grateful. Jacob will live a long life of joy and fulfillment, a life with little resentment or entitlement. It's blessed to live that way. Jacob is a joy to have as a houseguest. He is coming home for Christmas and I hope to see him.

Humility has always been a trait of the great men and women of the ages. It is said that even when the illustrious poet Thomas Hardy was so famous, he still submitted his poems for publication to periodicals with a stamped self-addressed envelope for the return of his manuscript in case it got rejected. This was in spite of the fact that any periodical would gladly pay huge sums of money to have his work. That's humility. He was humble enough to know that even as famous as he was, his work could still be rejected.

William Barclay tells the story of John Cairns, the principal of the United Presbyterian Theological College in Edinburgh in the late 1800s. Get this.

He would never enter a room first. He would always say, "You first; I follow."

Once, as he came on to a platform, there was a thunderous roar of applause to welcome him. Not believing that the ovation could possibly be for him, he stood aside to let the person behind him go first and he himself began to applaud. He never dreamed that the applause could possibly be for him; he truly thought it must be for someone else.

Hear this: Men and women of real character know nothing of self-importance. It's the insecure, those of low self-esteem, who claw their way to the position of honor, only to be told to sit back down and let someone else sit in their place.

Here is a clue on how we can work on our humility, and how to look at the many facts of life. We need to acknowledge that the more we know, the more we don't know. Only God knows everything. We don't. And the more we know, the more we should realize how much we don't know. So don't get prideful. However much we achieve, it is not much in the end apart from the love and grace of God.

I have friends who really want to do something great by the age of 40, and when they have not, they feel depressed. I say, we never do anything great in life at 40 or later. And if we think we have achieved greatness, we delude ourselves. What is great apart from the grace of God who always plays a major role in our deeds?

However much we have achieved, in the scope of things it is not much really apart from what God can do with what little we have done. Who are we to think we deserve the place of honor?

You see, greatness will not be measured in quantity—how much money or awards we have. I think

greatness can be that you have sponsored one Compassion child, or maybe two or three, and you are pouring your life into those one, two, or three children, writing them letters, sending them gifts, affirming them, and believing in them. No one sees you write those letters or send those Christmas, birthday, or family gifts. Only God knows. And it is in your humility that you realize you have so much more than those Compassion children, and it's not because you deserve it, but it's because of God's grace. And so out of that appreciation we pour our lives into those less fortunate than we.

So why, Pastor Dan, is the title of the sermon *Grasp Loosely versus Grab Tightly*? I have learned that for everything in life, I have to grasp things very loosely for I know they are not mine to own but only to care for.

Imagine me placing a light bulb in your hand, a light bulb representing Jesus Christ, the Light of the World and the blessings He has given you. You hold it gently, carefully.

But if you grab it tightly, as if to say "It is mine, mine to keep forever and ever," you can break it, and you can harm yourself.

God may have given you children, a house, friends, or a job. You can't hold on to them too tightly.

It's the same with holding a little chick in your hand. You grasp it loosely for it is precious and valuable and full of life. But if you grab a little chick and hold it too tightly, you might harm or kill it.

Precious things in life, we should grasp loosely. They were never ours to begin with. God can take them away or give them to us. It's not for us to hold on to them so tightly that we think we own them or deserve them.

Grabbing or holding too tightly in a fist snuffs out the life of the dream or plan God had for us.

Imagine that you are applying for a job. Do you hold onto that possible job position tightly, or do you hold onto it loosely? If you lose it, if you don't get the job, know that it was never yours to begin with. And if you get it, then praise God; hold it loosely, gently for God in His grace has given it to you. Just remember that you don't own it; it can come or go.

I am writing a book on how to pick a spouse. Three publishers have turned me down. Am I anxious about it? No. First, I know great books have been turned down by many publishers—books like Harry Potter or Dune, or movies like Rocky.

Second, I hold onto the project loosely because all ideas and projects are in God's hands. They're not mine. So I sleep well. I am not anxious. If I hold them too tightly, I will be too overcontrolling.

But get this. Two days ago I heard that two other publishers are definitely interested in my book, and these publishers are probably far better than the ones I initially wanted and the ones who had turned me down. I'll know in a month or so how it turns out.

I have no anxiety, even after months of writing and waiting because it was not mine to lose for I never had it in the first place.

Grasp loosely or grab tightly. *Grab* is the right word. Perish the thought if I grab the seat of honor, or a project or position. I take it even when not offered. Whether it's a thing, like an apartment, a house, a place of honor, or money, if we grab too tightly then we are wrongfully saying, "It's mine. My precious, my precious," as

Gollum says in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

With Christmas just around the corner, and for this Communion Sunday, we are reminded that the greatest gift of grace from God the Father is Jesus Christ, who came to earth for us not because we deserved it but because God loves us. It's not because we have done certain things but because He loves us. This is hard for us to understand, especially if we are overachievers who fight our way to certain seats or positions.

When we realize that the baby Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, grew up to be the man who will be tortured and killed for our sake, who are we to say that we deserve anything when we all got a second chance through Jesus? When we choose to follow Jesus in this life, then we are really saying that all things will be held loosely.

We will hold things loosely because we trust a God who came to earth. And for everything that we have, everything, we're just stewards of them; God is the owner.

We grasp things loosely because whether we gain or lose things, we trust God. Whether He gives or takes away, we will always trust a person who gave their life for us, and who offers us the Holy Spirit as a constant counselor and comforter.

We hold things loosely because God is in control. When we try to control things, people, and events, we always mess up. We become too pushy or ambitious. So we try to do things God's way. And we learn to trust Him even in times of darkness or in waiting.

When it comes to Communion, we can remember why we can trust the Lord. He even said,

"Remember me; remember Me every time you take this sacrament."

We can remember that on the night when He was betrayed, when He might have wanted to grab hold of the cup and say, "Here, take it, God, away from my lips. I don't want this cup of bitterness and pain."

No, He held it loosely and said, "Okay, if You want Me to drink it, then I will out of My love for EVERY person in this room. I will suffer for their sake so that they might trust Me and hold things loosely. And so, on the night He was betrayed...."

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