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“Riding the Pony Back to the Barn”

A sermon by Robert L. Brawley

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:10-16; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Open our eyes, O Lord, that we may behold wondrous things out of your Word. Amen.

Jim Lowry crossed my path ever so quickly in 1992. Jim Lowry, who had just become the pastor of Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, was introduced to me. We passed the usual niceties, and after that, I heard about Jim from time to time without seeing him. But we Presbyterians have historically made some claims about providence. True, some Presbyterian theologians and football players make providence out to be that God determines everything ahead of time. That kind of providence for the future can be a source of hope for us. “For we know that in all things, God works together for good to those who love God” (cf. Romans 8:28). “For nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (cf. Romans 8:39). That kind of providence for the future can be a source of hope. But providence for the future never does give us the details of what is going to happen, and in a certain respect, providence becomes looking back at the past and looking back at the paths of people from the past who have crossed our paths.

It is uncanny how Jim Lowry’s path crossed mine once again. It was mediated by Joe Harvard. Joe heard that Jim was writing a book on Mark, and he hinted to Jim that I might be willing to read the manuscript and make some comments and write a foreword. So our paths crossed again—on the Internet. Yet again our paths crossed, and this time, it was mediated by this congregation because when we

celebrated Joe Harvard's retirement, Jim and I were both there, and we saw each other face to face for the first time in 21 years. The role of providence is still in play this morning because I am appropriating one of Jim Lowry's stories.

Jim Lowry's stories are very autobiographical. They are about Great Falls, South Carolina, which is named for the "Great Falls" on the Catawba River, beside which it stands. It is still a misnomer. The "Great Falls" on the Catawba River never were waterfalls. They were some kind of rapids, some rocks over which water cascaded. Fairly early in the 20th century, a dam dried up the northern half. Later, another dam flooded the lower half. There's nothing great about the "Great Falls" on the Catawba River, and the town has very little to boast about being "great." It's like this: Great Falls is 30 miles down the road from Rock Hill, South Carolina, where I went to high school. And in football, their varsity played our "B" team. To put it another way, every ten years when they took the census, Great Falls turned out to be the size of my high school. Nevertheless, it was source of striking characters for Jim Lowry's stories.

Today, I'm appropriating his story about Skeeter Shifflett. It's a story about Jim's younger brother, Banks, and Skeeter. Skeeter and Banks were the same age. Skeeter was a near neighbor from down the road, and he and Banks were constant playmates. But at 5 years of age, Skeeter was bad to brag: "My daddy can whoop your daddy with one hand tied behind his back." An unlikely contest. Banks' daddy was not the fighting kind. He knew how a soft word turned away wrath. "My dog can tree a 'coon and might nigh climb the tree to get him down! My grandma's tomatoes are a might nigh as big as watermelons."

When Jim was 15 and Skeeter and Banks were 5 years old, one day, Silas Clarkson backed his horse trailer up to the Lowry's barn and unloaded a white Shetland pony that Jim's father had bartered for merchandise at his hardware store—an honorable way to settle a debt. Banks immediately named the white pony "Silver." But Silas Clarkson warned that the pony was lazy—bad, seriously stubborn, lazy. When Jim saddled the pony and put Banks in the saddle, Silver did not move. The only thing they could do was to get the pony to walk around in the pasture with Jim pulling on the bridle. But they soon discovered that, given his own way, the pony would trot straight back to the barn. Soon, Skeeter came by. "Why, my uncle's got

a horse twice this big! He can run might nigh a hundred miles an hour! Last time I rode him, we was both so tired, we almost fell over!”

So Jim put the saddle on the pony, put Skeeter on the saddle, and said, “This pony’s name is Silver. All you have to do is to let out, ‘Heigh-ho, Silver! Away!’” So Skeeter did. “Heigh-ho, Silver! Away!” And Silver stood still. So he did it again: “Heigh-ho, Silver! Away!” This time, he kicked the pony on the sides. Silver stood still. So Jim took the bridle and led the pony to the end of the dirt road. When he got to the end, he said, “Now it’s Banks’s turn.” Skeeter surrendered the saddle to Banks, Jim turned the pony back toward the barn, and Banks let out, “Heigh-ho, Silver! Away!” Jim let go of the bridle, and the pony trotted directly back to the barn.

And that is what Jesus’ story is about, too. When you go to a banquet, don’t choose the place of honor because the host might come and say, “Give this place to another,” and in disgrace, you would have to take the lowest place. And somebody else rides that pony back to the barn.

Of course, the setting for this is the Roman province of Palestine, and we know enough about the setting to know that it has to do with two kinds of people: the haves and the have-nots. And it has to do with two sets of social values: honor and shame, and benefaction and reciprocity, perhaps better expressed as generosity with obligations to pay back.

We also know from the setting that none of the guests at this banquet would have been from the top 2-3% of the super-rich. But they would have been from the top 10% of those who were able to accumulate enough wealth to throw a party like this and to invite other people from the top 10%. The Roman world hardly knew anything like our middle-class today. The other 90% were peasants who were at the subsistence level. They might be able to make ends meet year after year, but they were unable to accumulate wealth. Nothing was laid by for the future: no savings account, no personal plan from Northwestern Mutual. Jesus gives no striking teaching. His advice would hardly be worth collecting a counselor’s fee.

When you throw a party, don't invite people from the top 10%. Then your relationship with them will be based on the obligation to pay back. Instead, invite people from the 90%, from the subsistence level, and then your relationship with them will be based on mutuality.

Hardly anyone notices that before we begin to judge the leader of the Pharisees, who invited Jesus in the first place, too harshly, we need to note that he did invite Jesus from the 90%, from the subsistence level who could not and would not repay. Still, this banquet was playing the system of honor and shame, and this banquet was working the system of generosity but with obligations to pay back.

There is another layer to this parallel to who gets to ride the pony back to the barn. In the Great Dinner in Luke 14:15, one of the guests sings out, "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!" When we sit down at the banquet in God's kingdom, what a day! In response, Jesus tells a parable about another great banquet, and the great surprise of this great banquet is that none of the guests from the top 10% who were originally invited get to come in. But the 90% from the subsistence level, from the highways and hedges, do. When this man who envisions the glory of the kingdom of God hears this parable, he must have lost his breath because the way Jesus tells the parable, he is not one of those who gets to go in to the banquet. And somebody else is riding that pony back to the barn.

I suppose that when we hear a story like Skeeter and Banks, most of us probably identify with Banks. When the young braggart gets his one-uppance, we ride back to the barn with Banks. But I'm wondering, if we really want to get what Jesus is saying, we should try to identify with Skeeter. Here are some ways we might do that.

When I was teaching in Mexico, one day I visited the main building of the University of San Luis Potosi. It's a multi-storied building built around a large courtyard. When I walked in the main entrance into that courtyard, students around on different floors of the balcony started shouting, "Yankee! Go home!" As patriotic as I think I am, I didn't think it was without reason that they identified me with what they perceived to be a bully from up north who from time to time expressed generosity—foreign aid and self-help programs—but always with

obligations to pay back, one way or another. And so when I see a video of some bullies beating up a kid on a school bus, as much as I detest bullying and want to stop it, I'm also constrained to identify with the bullies.

When we leave church and travel home, we travel a bit on Old Oxford Road that goes through one of our less-esteemed neighborhoods, and as much as I care about streets and sidewalks up to code, I wonder if they don't feel bullied by Treyburn up the road, where I live, especially if they read the signs at our entrance in English and Spanish: "*Attention. We have a Neighborhood Watch. We call police.*" Or maybe it's when we check out at Kroger, and we have a grocery cart full of fine food, fresh organic produce, quality meats, some special bread from the bakery, and some imported cheese. And beside us, an 8-year old tugs at her T-shirt as she watches us with that lean and hungry look. It isn't just government systems that bully the poor by increasing their tax burden. At the same time, if you and I make about a million dollars, our tax burden will be relieved by \$11,000. As much as we genuinely regret it, most of us are complicit in lording it over others. The good news is that Jesus wants us to live in mutuality. Jesus is trying to get our attention by telling us a story about someone else who gets to ride the pony back to the barn.

Let us pray.

Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my prayers. If you, O Lord, should mark inequities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you, there is forgiveness so that you may be revered. Amen.