

AFTER YOU

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

August 31, 2025

Pentecost 12

Sirach 10:12-18

The beginning of human pride is to forsake [Adonai]; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations. Therefore, [Adonai] brought upon them unheard-of calamities and destroyed them completely. [Adonai] overthrew the thrones of rulers and enthroned the lowly in their place. [Adonai] plucked up the roots of the nations and planted the humble in their place. [Adonai] laid waste the lands of the nations and destroyed them to the foundations of the earth. [Adonai] removed some of them and destroyed them and erased the memory of them from the earth. Pride was not created for human beings or violent anger for those born of women.

Luke 14:1,7-14

One Sabbath, when Jesus came to eat a meal in the house of one of the leading Pharisees, the guests watched him closely. ... Jesus went on to address a parable to the guests, noticing how they were trying to get a place of honour at the table. “When you’re invited to a wedding party, don’t sit in the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished has been invited. Otherwise the hosts might come and say to you, ‘Make room for this person,’ and you would have to proceed shamefacedly to the lowest place. What you should do is go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your hosts approach you, they’ll say, ‘My friend, come up higher.’ This will win you the esteem of the other guests. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Then Jesus said to the host, “Whenever you give a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends or colleagues or relatives or wealthy neighbours. They might invite you in return and thus repay you. No, when you have a reception, invite those who are poor or have physical infirmities or are blind. You should be pleased that they can’t repay you, for you’ll be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”



(prayer)

Today's first reading is a cautionary tale on relying too wholeheartedly on one's most self-aggrandizing opinion of one's self.

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- The author of Sirach worries that one's overzealous view of themselves can limit one's ability to connect to God

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Aside: Some of you may have thought *Hmm, I don't think I know the book of Sirach.*

- good catch...
 - Sirach is not actually in the Bible
 - not a book in either the old or new testaments

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The Book of Sirach is also known as

- *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach,*
- *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Eleazar,*
- or *Ecclesiasticus* (not to be confused with the biblical book of Ecclesiastes)

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I don't think that I even heard about Sirach until I was in theological school.

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[Wikipedia](#) will tell you that Sirach is one of several inter-testamental texts (mostly written between the years 200 and 100BCE)

- other than the book of Daniel, the Old Testament Canon was pretty much set before the year 200BCE
- And the first New Testament books weren't written until the 50sCE

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When I said that Sirach was not in the Bible, that's not fully correct

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Sirach and the other *post Hebrew Bible* writings are usually included with the Old Testament in Catholic and Orthodox editions of the Bible

- when people talk about the difference between Catholic and Protestant bibles, they are talking about these *extra* books

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Most protestant bibles do not include these inter-testamental books

- If they *are* included, it is usually in an appendix called **The Apocrypha**
 - from a greek work meaning *hidden*
- Martin Luther once wrote of the apocrypha:
 - *They are books which are not considered equal to the Holy Scriptures, but are useful and good to read.*

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That's what I chose to do today when the Revised Common Lectionary offered a few verses from Sirach, chapter ten as an alternative reading.

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I think it useful and good to hear that when I have excessive selfish opinion of myself

- I can hinder my ability to be close to my God

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I remember going to a movie with a friend... several decades ago.

- This was long before the current practice of having pre-assigned seating in the major chain

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movie theatres

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When we walked in... there was only one other group of people in the theater.

- I asked: *So, where do you want to sit?*
- My friend replied (loud enough for everyone to hear): *I want to sit right there* (pointing at the already occupied seats)

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It was (of course) a joke
- but can you imagine the arrogance if we really expected them to move for us

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It does happen!
- my airline employee spouse can tell you many stories of people's insistence that they deserve to be able to change their seats on the plane with a complete stranger

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When I was a student at the Vancouver School of Theology, (besides learning about the Apocrypha) as part my path towards becoming an ordained minister
- in my second year, I took on the role setting up the chapel for weekly United Church worship services

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Like *this* space, VST's Epiphany Chapel uses chairs and so there are near endless set-up possibilities
- the seating pattern was at the discretion of whoever was tasked with leading worship that day
- there was a default set up, but if they wanted something special, they just had to let me know ahead of time

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I can tell you that (although) we were almost exclusively theological students and professors
- we shared a habit not uncommon in many local congregations
- Some seats at church were more desirable than others
- I used to joke that I don't know why I bothered setting up a front row,
- because no one ever sits there
- Actually a popular set-up for small worship gatherings was a single row of chairs in a semi-circle
- so everyone got to sit in the *back* row (or *front* row)

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As a guest in a pharisee's home one Friday evening, Jesus noticed people jockeying for certain seats.

- It seems like an old proverb came to his mind
- In Proverbs 25:6-7, we can read:
 - *Do not put yourself forward in the monarch's presence or stand in the place of the great,*
 - *for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

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What we heard from Luke today was Jesus extrapolating a new parable based on that old proverb.

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The original proverb is clearly centred on rigid social class expectations

- in the courts of the king, there were hierarchical protocols
- one was expected to know their place
 - and could expect to be *put in their place* should they misjudge the place they should be in
- The proverb seems to be designed to save people embarrassment in a room full of *important* people

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By changing the old proverb into a wedding banquet context, Jesus makes it less about class disparities

- and more about familial and community relationships
- the deeper (the more important) connection you have... might warrant you a “better” seat

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Some of you know that one of my four sons is getting married in October (only five weeks from now)

- both the ceremony and reception will be here in the church
 - I will have the triple roles of *officiating minister, father of the groom, and property host* that day
- This will be the ninth wedding that I will have conducted as Spirit of Hope's minister since 2020.
 - But, it will be the first one I have officiated in this building
 - And... it will be the first time that the church has been booked to host a wedding reception
 - something that I know was hoped for after the church renovations

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In preparation for the big day, I have been given access to the couple's (work-in-progress) Google doc file with all of their notes and plans

- Most relevant to me are the rehearsal and ceremony sections:
- ideas of how they might want...
 - to walk into the church
 - what music will be played when
 - where the wedding party might stand and in what order
 - and who (besides me) will be involved in the wedding service itself
- I know that the plan is to set up tables and chairs for the reception in the hall on Friday (after the rehearsal) – but there are no details in the doc file
 - I'm pretty sure that there will be a head table
 - But I'm not sure whether it will be just for the couple or some or all of the wedding party

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sitting there

- I'm not sure how practical it will be to have a head table of sixteen people
- Regardless, it looks like there will be no assigned seating for the guests
 - It will be a fun anthropological game to watch and analyze the chair choices people make
 - Who will choose to sit where and with whom?
 - Will there be impromptu seat saving?
 - Will everyone wind up happy with where they end up eating their dinner?

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At many wedding banquets, there can be protocols for who gets fed first

- For October 4th, I know there are games to be played to decide on the order

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And, of course, there will be needs and desires of certain people that are unique to them

- if hearing or sight is impaired, sitting closer can be very helpful
- some might find it wise for them to be on the side for easy exits
- at a dinner, one's age, medical needs, or hunger level might impact their choice as to how early to join the food line.

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Most gatherings of people will have any number of formal and informal expectations

- now how well those expectations are known can vary
- especially those unwritten rules
 - which may only be expected by a small number of people

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When a new person inserts themselves into an existing group

- there is a time of acclimatization
- how smooth that time is can be an initial indication of how welcoming the group is
 - as is... how patient and kind the existing people are with the newcomers
- Those who set the expectations determine what welcome looks like
 - and what inclusion feels like

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I am grateful to be back helping lead worship services after a few weeks away.

- Thank you to everyone who made weekly services happen in my absence

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Over the summer, I willingly put myself into situations that were unfamiliar or new to me.

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1. I was among several hundred people at the in-person meeting of the United Church's General Council (in Calgary)

- Although, I have been to in-person GCs three times before, and I was able to connect with a few friends from all over this United Church of ours

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- there were mostly unfamiliar faces in that big room
- everyone else at table 50 was a stranger to me
- The first full day of GC45 began with everyone moving into Knox United Church (a few blocks away) and shared in an apology from the church... to the church:
 - offered to United Church's past and present 2S&LGBTQIA+ members, adherents, and ministers.
- Over six days of the meeting, we discussed a number of potential actions and statements that the Church could take
 - As has been the case at every wider church meeting I've ever attended...
 - on the last day, as the end of the agenda came near, some of us regretted how well we had used our time earlier in the meetings
 - Our inability to leave time to deal with some items before we left Calgary gave rise to accusations of misplaced priorities... even intentional avoidance
 - So... for the second GC I have attended in a row, the final supper would be eaten late.

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2. I went to two different "town halls"

- each one organized by one of the two main political parties in Alberta, with names like...
 - [Alberta Next](#) and
 - [Better Together](#)
- I will try not to cross that line into partisan politics (a no no for charitable organizations like a church)
 - but at one of them I had a say in what topics would be discussed
 - and was invited to chat in small groups before people spoke to the whole group.
 - At the other one I had to watch videos which promoted one side of the issues before I was allowed to speak
 - And when I did speak, I had the privilege of getting my mic cut off when I asked my question?

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3. Nine days ago (although I was technically still on holidays) I went to church (of sorts)... an outdoor worship service

- led by American musician and quite-sure-of-himself christian evangelist, [Sean Feucht](#) as part of his eleven stop Canadian *Let Us Worship* tour
 - Did you hear about him?
 - He is not the most inclusive christian out there and likes to label those who do not measure up to his expectations as demons, the enemy, and evil.
 - He has a long track record of anti-lgbtq views
 - He got a lot of publicity for his tour, when the venues he booked (mostly operated by municipalities or parks organizations) began revoking his permits to perform, requiring last minute changes... often to fields on private farms
 - In one major city, his concert found a new home in a willing church, who wound up being fined for not getting the proper permit for such an event
 - In the end, nine of eleven events had to re-located
 - guess in which provinces Feucht was allowed to perform on public lands

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- I'll give you a hint, neither one has direct access to tide water.
- At one of these two, a local politician (a cabinet minister in fact) even gave the worship team a late night tour of the nearby government building
- When later told that this was not following protocol, he said *oops, I won't do it again.*
- Back to the Let Us Worship event, decked out in most colour rainbow attire including my big church cross, I went to the Alberta legislative grounds to show Feucht, his disciples, and anyone else watching that not every follower of Jesus is like that
 - Most people let me be, but someone told me that I didn't belong
 - Someone else told me that I should go into a fenced off pen designed for protesters
 - Early on, I had a burly guy follow me around; I guess I was a potential threat
- The concert lived up its reputation
 - It included enough hate to drown out any empty love language that was professed in speech and lyric
- Personally I was (of course) offended (as a minister) by the theological message
 - but I was also offended (as a church musician) by the uninspiring vacuous, poorly sung, two chord music repertoire
 - Although [*Our God is an Awesome God*](#) is a real classic of a praise chorus
 - a catchy banger of a song
 - I even found myself singing along (sing)
 - which did draw some curious looks from the woman in front of me,
 - who probably couldn't believe that I knew the words...
 - 'cause, you know... demons

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4. Fortunately... my palette was cleansed the next day

- when I walked with dozens of church friends in the Edmonton pride parade.
- I basically wore the same thing as I had the evening before.
 - Yet, the feeling of welcome and belonging could not have been more polar opposite.

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The various summer groups that I choose to insert myself in

- all had pre-existing expectations for my involvement
 - and to be honest, I think that I was intuitive enough to expect what the expectations would be in each case

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If it is a goal of a group to include new people

- that group needs to ensure that the expectations they expect are consistent with their inclusion goals

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There are far too many churches with **All Are Welcome** signs

- where the actual definition of *one*, *two*, or *three* of those words can be up for debate

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Regardless of the actual date of the coming autumnal equinox, and the temperature outside

- with this being the labour day week
 - we are at the unofficial end of the summer season
- Most groups that have taken a break for the summer are ready to start up again
 - And many of these are open to expanding the seats around the table
- This is true for schools and churches and other groups that gather people together

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We do well to be mindful of the cautions implied in our scripture passages:

- And I don't mean the part where we should assume that we fit in the lowest, least desirable, most inconvenient place
 - although humility is an admirable trait
- But the message that the nature and rigidity of the expectations we put on others always impacts our ability to authentically welcome
 - and the ability of newcomers and the curious to become involved

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Today, and in the weeks to come

- we will get to put this theory into practice

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Jesus (and Sirach) definitely agree that excessive hierarchical self-worth and arrogance will get in the way

- Jesus might sound like low/high hierarchies are a given, and the best we can do is know our place
- but the end of the parable offers an additional insight
 - when you host a banquet, don't just invite those who might offer you something in return
 - but invite those who will simply benefit from being included.

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Our God is an awesome God!

- Let's do what we can to make sure we use our efforts to make real God's *wisdom, power and love* to everyone in our midst!

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Let us pray:

God of All, inspire us to be humble, gentle, and patient. May we love others the way that you love and may we offer grace to all those around us. Amen.

#1MV All Are Welcome (v1,2,5)

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