

## **“Who’s Coming to Dinner?”**

**October 2, 2022 World Communion Sunday**

**Rev. Dixie Brachlow**

**Luke 14: 15-24**

**House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

*One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, ‘Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’<sup>16</sup> Then Jesus said to him, ‘Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.’<sup>17</sup> At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’<sup>18</sup> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies.’<sup>19</sup> Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.’<sup>20</sup> Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’<sup>21</sup> So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’<sup>22</sup> And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’<sup>23</sup> Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.’<sup>24</sup> For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’*

Some of my most poignant memories of community were created around food. As a child, I relished Thanksgiving dinners with grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins in a small town in Iowa. We gathered to celebrate together with turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, --oh yes, and marshmallow jello -- and pumpkin and apple pie. As a pastor, I have been moved by the laughter and tears at funeral receptions over meals of potato salad and ham sandwiches, deviled eggs and cookies, cakes and pies. And at weddings, we bring in far-flung friends and relatives, who come to celebrate a joyful occasion with the bride and groom, eating together and being served often-scrumptious wedding cake.

We give hospitality as we welcome and invite in acquaintances who -- through dining together-- become friends and companions. The word “companion” comes from the Latin *cum*, meaning “with,” and *panis*, meaning “bread.” Our companions are those with whom we break bread. One of the earliest restaurants in Europe had a Latin inscription over the door: *Venite ad me omnes qui stomacho laboratoratis et ego restaurabo vos*. In English, it translates: “Come to me all whose stomachs cry out in anguish and I shall restore you.” That’s a take-off of what Jesus said, of course, in Matthew 11: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest*” (v.28). (Russell Chandler, *Feeding the Flock: Restaurants and Churches You’d Stand in Line For*, Alban Institute, 1998, p. 105).

It is actually very appropriate to link Jesus with food, because, really, every time you turn around in the Scriptures, Jesus is eating and drinking. He began his ministry turning water into wine at a wedding, and fed the 5,000 on the hillside, was known for eating and drinking “with sinners,” and he said others called him “a

glutton and a wine-bibber” (Matt. 11:19). Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples and later fed them breakfast on the beach. Sharing food and parables about eating in the kingdom of heaven are significant! “They tell us of a God of joy and celebration, a God of life and health, a God who offers us ‘soul food,’ the very ‘bread of heaven.’” (Leonard Sweet, *Sweet’s SoulCafe*, in *ibid.*)

In today’s text, Jesus is at it again! Here he is, eating at the home of a leading Pharisee. It was on the sabbath, and Jesus had just told a parable which advised a host to not invite people who could repay him, but to invite those in real need. Jesus said, “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” Then – if that wasn’t embarrassing enough to his host--Jesus went on to tell today’s parable, one which was **not** what we’d call “socially sensitive” to that host and guests, either.

It is the story of the Great Banquet. The host is wealthy and has a servant whom he sends out to remind the guests that the feast is now ready. But what a stinging surprise: the ones who had been invited all start to bow out. Apparently this double invitation – the second reminder – was a normal thing then; it gave other guests a chance to hear who’s going to “be” there. Apparently, word had spread, and as the servant checked in with each guest, they made excuses. Paltry excuses. “I bought some cows; I bought a field and have to look at it; I just got married. I cannot come.”

In the 1960’s, The Singing Nuns became quite a sensation, and Sr. Miriam Therese Winter’s simple songs of Gospel stories included this banquet scene in Luke 14. “The Wedding Banquet” is a song that repeats the parable. The refrain is about those who gave their flimsy excuses. You may remember it:

*I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife,*  
*cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum,*  
*cannot come.*

*I have bought me a  
Pray, hold me excused, I*

Naturally, the host, who was being shunned by so many important people he’d invited, had abundant tables of food awaiting them! (Think of the gardeners here, with tomatoes and zucchini having been planted innocently in June; now they are spilling over, piles of them on shelves, in baskets, buckets, stairs, and you’re desperate to give such abundance to someone who might enjoy home-grown tomatoes, because they need to be eaten soon!) That host’s preparations and luscious food was ready, with nobody to enjoy it. So, what did he do? He sent out his servants into the streets to bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame. Anyone on the street they could grab: bring them! These guests now invited to come in were the ones who hadn’t gained much in this world. And THEY got to feast at the Master’s table!

Scandalous! Of course, it’s a parable. This is all about God’s table in the kingdom! God is lifting up and including the very people who are humble and not self-sufficient and efficient and award-winning and successful. They are hungry people, grateful for food.

Do you recall the 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* It starred Sidney Poitier, with Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. It was in color, but was literally about black and white. It was about a black man coming to dine at the table of a white couple, and not just as friend, but as their future son-in-law. It broke barriers then, 55 years ago, and if we look around our social and religious gatherings, I fear we have to admit that, for the most part, we haven't yet succeeded in eliminating racial and many other barriers.

Hospitality extended to anyone that is seen as “other” is hard. From our birth, our society has implanted ideas of inequality as a matter of course. In an evolving multi-racial and pluralistic society, it has been suggested we need to further break down our barriers. One exercise suggests this: Think about your own community, maybe an area of the Twin Cities. “Imagine,” they said, “that everyone exists in the community in an invisible box. The inside walls of the box have a mirror effect so that we perceive nothing that is not reflected in our own image. We are vaguely aware of the poor and destitute of our community, but what we see or think of them is, more than likely, done without thought [sic.]. In most instances, when we pass each other on the street or in a store, we relate to one another separated by the boxes. As long as we remain isolated we have no opportunity for genuine community, no opportunity to learn from each other.” (Jo Vaughn Gross, *The Welcome Table*, 1995, p. 61.)

But in Jesus' teachings, as in today's parable, he describes a God who is continually present in the world, calling us out of our boxes and into relationships with all people, countering the forces that keep us in isolation. We build community as we get to know the person we had always seen as “other” and we break down social barriers.

When we lived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I volunteered at a soup kitchen called “The Banquet.” Its motto was, “***We will not serve the poor poorly.***” This Luke 14 parable was their inspiration to prepare a beautiful table, complete with flowers. The servers and hungry guests were seated together. After we'd dished out servings a while, we each were to pick up a plate, join the line, and sit down at the table and converse a bit with the guests. When a child had a birthday, a professionally decorated cupcake, topped with a lit candle, was ceremoniously delivered amidst the singing of “Happy Birthday.” Imagine many tears welling up because many of these children had never had their own birthday celebrated with candles and such joyful singing.

And so, I think of the children—often viewed as “the least of these”—all round us.

Bread for the World, a Christian lobbying group for the hungry, notes

**Globally, hunger is reaching historic levels. Before the pandemic, 135 million were hungry. Now 270 million go hungry.**

Malnutrition is responsible for nearly half of all preventable deaths among children under 5. By next year, nearly 14 million more children are likely to be severely malnourished because of the pandemic's impacts. This means that 58.9 million young children—or almost the whole population of South Africa—will likely face life-threatening malnutrition if the global community doesn't act.

And here in the U.S., despite recognition of the importance of nutrition, 1 in 6 children are at risk of hunger. Among children younger than three, even “brief episodes of hunger can cause lasting damage to a child's mental and physical development.” (Bread for the World, online, September 2022).

If today's parable models who we are to claim as guests at the table, who we should literally feed, it is certainly children and the widows, the resident alien, the refugees of wars and of climate change – any at the bottom of the ladder.

Over and over Jesus calls his followers to acts of love and mercy, and proclaims, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). One Harvard Divinity School professor frames mercy another way. He says:

*There are two kinds of . . . people: there are 'therefore' people and there are 'however' people. 'Therefore' people say, 'There are children going to bed hungry every night in our community – 'therefore,' and they proceed to devise the ways in which they can meet the need. 'However' people make the same beginning statement: but go on to explain why nothing can be done about it.*

(Henry Joel Cadbury, in Gross, *The Welcome Table*, pp. 93-4.)

Think about it. Have you been a “therefore” person, one who devises ways to meet needs? How might we become part of the solution? How can we as God's community go into the streets and change unjust conditions? Every October we used to shelter homeless families in Project Home; now they are in given housing by nuns at St. Kate's Carondelet Center; yet Project Home still need funds and volunteers, too. We can also help food shelves by making those shopping carts by the back entrance overflow. Each week! One friend says that each month, she shops for an extra meal's worth of goods for the food shelf. Food for the hungry: think of our abundant vegetable garden, our serving meals for the homeless, our helping assemble items for the thousands of meals with Feed My Starving Children, which nourishes children all over the world. Our financial gifts and other offerings are important, too, of course.

Let's each be people who selflessly bring into the streets God's abundant love and hope, making a difference for good in our hurting world. Today's table fellowship is a sacramental meal, reminding us that we are God's own. The Holy Spirit is present with us as we take part, and the same Spirit sends us on our way, to spread the news of hope, to reach out and to invite in. The host calls us—along with our brothers and sisters, companions in Christ, all over the world--to the table.

On the bulletin is a revision of the refrain of the Singing Nuns' song, "The Banquet."

*Yes, I will come to the banquet to celebrate, of course.*

*I will bring along my partner, and perhaps ride my horse.*

*I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.*

*But I shall not miss the party. I will come! (twice)*

Alleluia! Amen!

**Affirmation of Faith** (adapted from the Belhar Confession) We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the unity of the communion of saints of the entire human family. And we believe that that this unity of the people of God must be manifest and active, in that we love one another; that we give ourselves willingly and joyfully to one another, that we all share one baptism together, that we eat of one bread and drink of one cup together, that we confess one name, one Lord, for one cause, with one hope, which is the height and the breadth and the depth and the love of Christ, forever and ever. Amen.

Benediction

May the blessing of God go before you, creator, redeemer, sustainer.

May God's grace and peace abound.

May God's Spirit live within you,

May God's love wrap you 'round.

May God's blessing remain with you always.

May you walk on holy ground. Amen.

May the love of God, who was and is and ever shall be,

And the grace of Jesus, who is among us,

And the blessing of the Holy Spirit who never leaves us, be with you all. Amen.

**Go** out into the world in peace;

Have courage'

Hold on to what is good,

Return no one evil for evil;

Strengthen the fainthearted,

Support the weak, and help the suffering;

Honor all people;

Love and serve the Lord,

Rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

