

A Place at the Table
Luke 14:16-24
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Well Good morning!

Deb and I are thrilled to be here with you today, and I am so very honored by your Pastor Nominating Committee for their invitation to preach to you. If these nine very special people reflect just a little bit of who you all are and what you all hold to be important—then you are a richly-blessed congregation indeed.

Our text for this morning, from the Gospel of Luke, comprises a parable of Jesus embedded in a story about Jesus, where both elements are being held in tension as they contrast and define one another: The Dinner at the Ruler of the Pharisees and the Great Banquet of our God.

But first—let me invite you to use your memory this morning, by asking you to imagine a great feast or a sumptuous meal among your family or friends... Maybe it was your wedding reception, or the wedding of your son or daughter? Maybe it was Sunday Dinner, or Thanksgiving with your extended family? Maybe it was Christmas Day, or even a cookout in your own backyard?

For myself, the very best memories of feasts and parties take me back to my childhood at Green Lake, Wisconsin: to long summer evenings where, under the Walnut tree in the golden light, the rough boards of our picnic table would be covered with red-chequered cloth and piled high with freshly-picked corn-on-the-cob, Dad's BBQ chicken, Grannie's dubious green jello and Mom's cherry pie. After a day spent swimming and water-skiing, I and my siblings

were always famished, and as we happily stuffed ourselves, watching the fluffy clouds sail slowly over the lake, our laughter rose up to join them.

I has my own appointed place at that table, right between my mother and my oldest sister (who had the annoying habit of suddenly forking food off my plate). Most of all, I remember how I felt to be sitting there: I felt loved and included; I felt safe and secure; I knew exactly who I was and to whom I belonged... And when supper was over, and the fireflies were beginning to blink across the lawn, I could hear my mother singing from inside the cottage as we played outside until dark. When I remember the best feast I ever attended, I think of that. What do you think of?

I

It was definitely NOT that kind of occasion which brought Jesus into the house of a leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath. He had been invited for only one reason: to be tested by these people who, as Luke puts it in the first verse of Chapter 14, were “watching him closely.” What were they watching for? To see if Jesus would break the laws of Judaism as they interpreted them by doing the work of healing on the Sabbath Day. And so, this “ruler of the Pharisees” had intentionally invited a second guest along with Jesus: a man who suffered from dropsy or massive edema. Knowing well what they were up to, Jesus asks them this question: “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” No one said anything. So Jesus heals this man with dropsy and sends him on his way. He then asks the gathering, “If one of you had a son or an ox who had fallen into a well on the Sabbath, would you not immediately pull him out?” And again—no one says anything.

This isn't the first time—and it won't be the last—that Jesus responds to his critics before they put their aspersions into words... And now he offers some constructive criticism of his own:

First, observing how these Scribes and Pharisees competed for the best seats in the house, he warns them that they may be asked by their host to “move over.” Awkward! (you don't want to sit at the Head Table at a wedding reception, do you, when you're not part of the wedding party?) “All who exalt themselves will be humbled,” he said, “but those who humble themselves will be exalted.” That's how the seating arrangement works at the Table of the Lord...

Second, Jesus urges these guests to consider inviting a different demographic to their parties: the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. “You will be blessed,” he said, “because they cannot do the same for you...You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

At this point in the narrative, at least one of his listeners begins to comprehend what Jesus is really saying. “Blessed in the one who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” he says. And Jesus responds with our text for this morning: the Parable of the Great Banquet.

II

I'd like to share with you three short observations concerning the parable itself:

First: Jesus' parable makes clear that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of Grace. No one has the right to enter this kingdom. We cannot earn or pay our way in. We are invited to be God's guests, and if we remain in the kingdom, we remain as family: as sisters and brothers in Christ. God provides the table:

whether or not we take our seats is up to us. How would you respond to an invitation like this?

Second: Jesus said the master invited “many”—which tells us that this Banquet is not meant to be exclusive. And yet, many chose not to attend. They all gave excuses (they literally “begged off” in the Greek), excuses involving their possessions, their business affairs and their families. Upon closer inspection, these excuses do not hold water. Who buys land without first looking at it? Who buys oxen (or for that matter an SUV) without first taking in out for a test drive? And as for the man who just got married—why don’t you just bring your partner with you? No, these excuses are just that: excuses to paper over the fact that those who were specifically invited had other priorities to pursue. Which pretty much describes most of us—at least at one point or another in our living. We get caught up in “the business of life” at the risk of missing out on the best that life has to offer: a place at the table...God’s Table... where all God wants to do is have a relationship with us... to feed us Bread from Heaven, talk with us, rejoice over us, love us and tell us—each one of us—that we belong there. Body and soul. Indeed, the one man who could feed 5000 people with just 5 loaves of bread has already shown us the grace and truth of this invitation. Yet too many of us are still laboring “for bread that does not satisfy.”

My last point is this: notice whom the master finally sends out his servant for: the same people Jesus encouraged the Pharisees to invite to their tables: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

I recently returned from a place where I personally experienced Christ’s grace-filled invitation to the Banquet. At the end of June, about 100 Presbyterians from roughly 7 congregations in the Presbytery of Chicago, along with a

group of mostly African-American young people with the Young Men's Educational Network from North Lawndale in the City took 12 15-passenger vans out to Sisseton, SD, which lies in the center of the Wahpeton Sioux Reservation. Our hosts were an Assembly of God congregation made up of both white and Native-American people. The area itself is rich in Presbyterian history: there are six Dakota Presbyterian churches still active on the reservation today, congregations that began as mission churches at roughly the same time First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest was chartered in 1859.

Our mission was to show more than 275 Dakota children that God loved them—using words when necessary—and that Jesus was the best Friend they could ever have. Our work also included distributing a semi-trailer full of fresh produce purchased by a number of our churches and laboring to restore and maintain these six monument churches. Yet our primary purpose was not work at all, but the ongoing invitation to be in relationship with these Native American friends through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Each evening, we would gather in the church hall for a meal, and in addition to the mission team, dozens of Native-Americans would arrive with their families. They would take their seats at the tables and gladly share fellowship over BBQ chicken, or meat-loaf, and on the last night—Tacos made with Indian Fry Bread. The house was packed for that!

As I looked around at the people, I saw young and old dressed every which way, some with walkers, some in wheelchairs. One young couple, gaunt and hollow-eyed, were a grim reminder of the ravages of Methamphetamine on the Reservation. And the Master said, “Bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame...”

God knows I've been all of these people at one time or another: Poor in spirit; Crippled by my sins; Blind to the truth; and Lame in my faith. Alfred Lord Tennyson once said of himself, "I stretch forth lame hands of faith, and grope, and clutch at dust and chaff, and faintly trust the larger hope." The larger hope, indeed. Which was exactly what I was beginning to perceive, there in that banquet hall in Sisseton.

Isaiah once saw a vision of another banquet: a great Feast in heaven on the holy mountain of God, where all the nations of earth would be seated, and the veil that is spread over this sorrowful world would finally be pulled away, and every tear wiped dry. Looking out on that banquet hall, I saw the four races that are woven into the totem of the Dakota Sioux People. I saw men and women; I saw rich and poor; young and old; high-school dropouts and PhD's; I even saw Presbyterians and Pentecostals speaking intelligibly to one another (a miracle!). Most of all, I realized I was seeing something holy: something filled with promise and laughter and joy, something that made me feel like I was back at the picnic table at Green Lake...only this time, it was the Lord's Table—and all of us had taken our places as people who belonged there.

III

Friends, that same Table is set before us now, right here in this place of worship. Blessed are those who will eat this Bread in the Presence of Christ! As someone who has served alongside you in this presbytery for many years, I know you to indeed be a congregation of wisdom, compassion and generosity. I see you working hard to make lifelong disciples of Jesus—and then sending those disciples to places like Lebanon Junction, Kentucky to serve. I see tremendous leadership here: for the Church and for the world...yet not too tremendous to neglect to take time to care for little children, or to keep watch

at a homeless shelter in the wee hours of a cold Waukegan night. I look out on your faces here today, and I know your commitment to hospitality through efforts like your new Great Room; I see your inclusiveness as a congregation, and through ministries like the Rummage Sale, I see your commitment to the community around you and to your mission partners around the world. And now, Christ's invitation has brought us all to this Table, here in this beautiful Sanctuary at the corner of Deerpath and Sheridan Roads, here in this place so rich in its history—and in its potential.

So let me ask you again—but this time not just as individual believers but as a believing Congregation: what is First Presbyterian's place at the table? Is it a place for humility and gratitude? For thankfulness and peace? Is it a place for serving others with joy? For inclusion and welcome? Is it a place for making disciples? Is it a place for enduring, indomitable love?

You are all these things—and more. And for my part, if you call me to be your Pastor, I promise to genuinely love you, to shepherd you, and to serve Christ alongside you, here in this place that for 160 years has done so much for the honor and glory of God. That sounds like a very long time, but not in the Kingdom. As the prophet Isaiah has shown us, this party's just getting started—and "the best is yet to be!"