

“A Place at the Table”
Text: Luke 14:15-24
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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.” Luke 14:23

Why did you come to church? Not necessarily this morning, though I'd be interested to know that as well, but the first time. What drew you in to worship on a Sunday morning, or Bible study on a Wednesday evening, or a fellowship dinner or mission project? What attracted you? For some, of course, the initial choice was not yours. You were carried into church in your parents' or grandparents' arms. And yet, at some point in your life, each of you made the decision to be a part of a Christian community. Perhaps you are considering it now. In an era when church attendance is no longer assumed or expected, each one of you came not out of compulsion or obligation, but by choice and in freedom.

The alarming statistics that I read in church publications on a weekly basis provide evidence of how unusual your choice to be here is in our time and place. Those statistics tell me that 90% of American churches of any denomination are either stagnant or declining in membership. They tell me that 3500 churches close their doors each year. They tell me that, while 96% of Americans say they believe in God, only 18% worship regularly in a faith community.ⁱ It is an unusual choice that you have made, to come to church.

Why did you do it? Well, if all the studies and surveys are correct, you are here today, or are in the church at all, because...someone invited you! This is how most of us end up in the faith community. At some point, last week or decades ago, someone said, “you should come to church.” And you said, “I think I will.” You put aside your reservations and anxieties and preconceived notions and you decided to give it a try. Many of us come to church first as invited guests. And, according to Jesus, this is exactly how it happens in the kingdom of God.

This morning's scripture passage is a parable, a story Jesus told to better illustrate an important point. The power of a parable is that it transforms everyday, mundane events and objects... a mustard seed, yeast mixed with flour, a net thrown into the sea, a man who hosted a great feast...into sacred channels of divine truth. When Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, he used parables that invited his listeners to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Through the lens of faith. When a child is baptized in this church, the water used is no different from what you may have used to wash your hands only moments before. And yet, in the mystery of the sacrament, it is transformed, just as this morning ordinary bread and grape juice will become for us a taste of the heavenly banquet. As Will Willimon has written, “To be a Christian is, in part, to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world.”ⁱⁱ

A parable does exactly that, reframes our vision of the ordinary world **and** opens us to new understandings of God and God's kingdom.

In this morning's story, the invitation is not to church but to a dinner party. The parable describes the ultimate embarrassment for any host. You clean the house, borrow chairs and dishes from the neighbors, clean the linen napkins, and prepare a wonderful meal. And then, one by one, just hours before they are to arrive, the guests begin to call. Sorry, can't make it. Couldn't find a babysitter. Too much going on at the office. Just not feeling very well this evening. Something came up. Have you seen the weather forecast? Just can't make it. So sorry. Thanks anyway. And, before the host can even catch his breath, his distinguished list of dinner guests has evaporated. No one is coming.

Well, this is a parable and so we should expect the unexpected. What is surprising is not the excuses of the invited guests (who hasn't heard, or used, them all?), but the reaction of the host. We are prepared for him to cancel the dinner in frustration. But he does not cancel the dinner. He broadens the invitation. "Go and send for those who were not initially invited. Especially those on the fringe of society. Bring in the outsiders, let them come to the table." The priority of the host is not an elite group of guests, but a crowded house, a full table.

And, Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God looks like. This is the kingdom of God: a great feast to which all are invited. This is the sad, tragic truth: some will simply be too busy or preoccupied to come to the table. And this is the call: come to the table, invite others as well.

We in the Presbyterian Church sometimes joke that the best way to draw a crowd of Presbyterians is to serve a meal, preferably one with deviled eggs and lots of mayonnaise. But there is theological truth in that wisecrack. From the earliest days of the Christian movement, acts of worship have centered on word and table. A meal is the fundamental repeated sacrament of this community. And, since those early days, the church has been in the business of extending the table.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in Catholic Mass at a beautiful church in Managua, Nicaragua. The church building is unique. It has only two walls. Because of this, the church is not able to keep anyone or anything out. Birds fly by as the priest delivers his homily. Children playing soccer occasionally kick a ball into the chancel area. People come and go. You can hear the sounds of street vendors and laughing children from the pews. A church that cannot keep anyone out. It is a parable of the kingdom of God, a sign of our mission.

Yes, we sit here this morning to worship God together in reverence and in praise. But it doesn't stop here. This church in Managua has found a way to both have church and be the church simultaneously. As we prepared for the Eucharist meal, people came in off the streets and joined in. I received my bread and was reminded of the unity to which we are called in Jesus Christ. This is not a Presbyterian or a Catholic table, we were reminded, this is the Lord's table and all who believe, all who accept the invitation are welcome to share in it. The boundaries of land and nationality and wealth and denomination were nonexistent at that table. The host was the one whose generous welcome transcends

every barrier, every prejudice, every human invented category that labels some people as acceptable and others as unacceptable. This is a host who saves a place at the table for all of us, especially for those whom we might never think to invite.

I believe this with all my heart: We can do nothing more antithetical to the gospel than to deny some a place at the table. When we keep people out, we disobey the one whose hospitality offended the self-righteous and upset the legalistic. When we presume to be the host, deciding who can and who cannot come to the table, we have transgressed the boundaries of what it means to be human creatures, and not the creator. We are not the host. We are the emissaries, the servants of the one who said, "I want my house to be full." We are invited guests, and we are carriers of invitation to others.

This morning, with Christian believers all over the globe, we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Its beginning was almost too small to notice. In 1936 a local group of Presbyterian ministers gathered to pray for the world. It was an uneasy time. War on the horizon. Financial markets in the midst of collapse. A divided and distrustful world. And these pastors were convinced that there was some way that the Christian community should respond. Their idea: what if we all gathered around the communion table on the same Sunday?ⁱⁱⁱ Hardly a proposal for world peace or economic stimulus. But those pastors knew the truth of the parable that Jesus tells this morning. They knew that the role of the church in a time of crisis is to set a table, prepare a meal, and then invite all people to come and share the feast. Because when there is a place for you at the table, you can be transformed by the grace you find there. Many of us have been transformed by that invitation, that welcome.

When you take the bread and the cup this morning, also take a moment to consider our brothers and our sisters sharing this meal all over God's good creation. Take a moment to remember our mothers and fathers in the faith who sat at this table long before us, and who extended the invitation. Take a moment to acknowledge the host, the one who beckons and calls, and saves a place at the table for you.

Don't pause to check your calendar for a free moment. Don't wait until the to do list is complete. Don't evaluate the worthiness of those around you, or even your own. Don't make excuses or apologies or alternate plans. Your name is on the invitation. Just come to the table. Just join the feast. Just spread the word. All are invited. All are invited. All are invited.

ⁱ "Taking Your Hospitality to the Next Level," Macedonian Ministries of Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.

ⁱⁱ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (September 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nccusa.org/unity/worldcommunionssunday.html>