

Jeremiah 2:4-13

⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ⁶They did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" ⁷I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. ⁸The priests did not say, "Where is the LORD?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

⁹Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. ¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. ¹¹Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place', and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Dinner with Jesus

August 28, 2016

I remember some time ago a trend among interviewers where they would ask someone, "If you could invite anyone to come for dinner, who would it be?" People would often reply with people like, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, Mother Teresa, Lazarus, a Grandparent or some long lost relative. I don't know who you might have on that list but some have even suggested that they would like to have dinner with Jesus. Now I don't know about you, but based on our reading this morning and all the recent encounters in Luke's Gospel, I don't know it that is such a good idea. I'm pretty sure it won't be a dinner where you enjoy a good glass of wine and some bread dipped in olive oil and tell wonderful stories. Jesus doesn't usually roll that way.

Jesus, as always, is watching you and examining your motives. He isn't judging you so much as asking you to look in the mirror and perhaps judge yourself. Always an uncomfortable thing, don't you think? Not that Jesus

wasn't a lot of fun at parties. I think he probably was because he certainly got a lot of invitations. But, I don't know if having him come to my house is something I want him to do. So, no, I don't think Jesus will be on my fantasy dinner list anytime soon but if you want to have dinner with him...well, go ahead.

But I think I'll pass because anytime I have an encounter with Jesus he will probably tell me a story, like today, that makes me think about my life and what is truly important to me. Especially about my sense of importance in the world which often defines me, sorry to say. I wish this were not true but it is. I think about how others see me and I struggle with being praised and honored for the things I do. I remember at times in my life thinking I was really a big shot and that I should be getting more respect for my talents. Even being in the pulpit is not safe from these types of fears and needs. Even preachers have big egos which you don't have to look very far to find in this televangelist age.

And I think if we are all honest today we too, want to be recognized and have the seat at the head of the table or at least near someone who is important. Like our reading from Jeremiah, we want to stop thinking about God's Kingdom and dig our own cisterns. We want to follow our own way, and the way of our kingdoms is through relationships with others like us who can give us something we need. Humility is not one of our strong virtues as human beings. And humility is the big lesson for us today. How to live humbly in a world where who you know, and climbing the ladder of success, has such a prominent place in our lives. And Jesus makes some keen observations this morning as he challenges those around him to sit at the table in God's Kingdom. To have a dinner party "God style", which is not always the way we do things.

One of the things that is clear to me in this story is that the dinner guests are not that much different than we are. We live in a world that operates very much like this one. Quid pro quo, this for that, a favor for a favor, tit for tat, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours are just some of the sayings we use to express this relationship. The one I like best is a line from the musical Chicago where Big Mama sings "When you're good to mama, mama's good to you!"

This is how the world of power and business operates then and now. As a performing artist I spent many years in a somewhat strategic dance with those whom we would consider Patrons of the Arts as well as Donors to the small college that I served for many years. I had often been invited to dinners sort of like the one we read about this morning.

The guest list was full of very wealthy and prominent couples lavishly dressed and immaculately coiffed. The tables were set with the finest china and silver, with at least 3 forks and 2 knives and wine glasses and champagne glasses. Wait staff floated throughout the room filling glasses and attending to every need of the guests. The lights were low and the mood sublime. Sort of like dinner at Downton Abby!

My role more often than not was to provide entertainment either as a soloist or as a director of a small show choir or something appropriate for the event. And as I sat in the back room waiting for dessert to be served (this is where performers wait) I had the opportunity to observe the crowd and I found myself doing the same thing Jesus does and that is watching people as they work the crowd and jockey for positions of power and influence.

Who is sitting at the president's table or with the chair of the department? Who is really important and dangerous as well? This is a world we know and understand. One look at our current political environment should convince you of that. They gather around them those who can do them the most favors, who can further their cause, who can protect them from the realities of the truth about themselves. Even our recent Olympic games gave us demonstrations of what happens to some people when they believe they are above the truth and who lack true humility. They believe they are number "One" and don't mind letting others know about it. Humble pie is not on the menu.

But Jesus is telling them and us that there is another way, a Kingdom way, and it is not based on wealth or power but on weakness and a lack of ability to pay back, or to reciprocate, or to scratch your back, unless of course you really have an itch.

David Lose, shared this in one his commentaries, he said,

“Why on earth waste an opportunity for social commerce by inviting those who have nothing to give you, who can do nothing for you, and who typically mean nothing to you? It’s crazy. True enough. But it’s also the kingdom of God.

There is no other defense for such counsel; really, except that this is the way God wants us to treat each other. Indeed, it’s the way God treats us -- creating us, giving us what we need to flourish, caring for us, forgiving us, redeeming us -- even though we can do nothing meaningful for God in return. In fact, about the only thing we can do in return, when you think about it, is to share what we’ve been given with others. This is the kingdom life, and it stands in stark contrast to the honor-and-shame world in which we live.”

I can’t resist thinking that Jesus might want to break out into that Garth Brooks song, “I’ve got Friends in Low Places” right about now. But I’ll resist doing so.

So what are we to do with these stories? I think the most important part of the story is that we are all reminded again that all are welcome in the Kingdom of God. That all are welcome at this feast, this party. That Jesus is the Host of Heaven, and to remember also that we are none of us really worthy nor can we earn our way into the kingdom of God. It is a gift, pure and simple, in fact your whole life is a gift to be shared. That as Jeremiah reminded the people again, that God had provided for them all along, offering them good things and yet, they went after other gods and other things that did not profit them. God offered them “a fountain of living water” but they chose to dig their own wells, their own cisterns, that were cracked and held no water.

And Jesus has reminded us over and over again as well, that God has provided what we need and he challenges us today to consider how we are sharing it and with whom are we sharing it. Who is invited to the party of your life, the life which God has given you and blessed you with? Who is welcome at God’s dinner party?

I want to leave you with this wonderful story shared about theologian and preacher Fred Craddock which I think put this all in perspective for me. You may have heard it before but it is a great story.

“A few years back, Fred was invited to lead some kind of preaching mission in Winnipeg (Friday night ... Saturday morning ... Saturday evening ... twice on Sunday ... you know the drill). When he finished Friday night, he noticed that it was spitting snow. His host told him not to worry, given that it was only mid-October. "Good," said Fred, "because all I brought from Atlanta was this little, thin jacket."

Fred went to bed. But when he got up the next morning, he couldn't open the door for all the white stuff that was piled against it. The snow was driving, the wind was howling, the temperature was falling and then the phone was ringing. It was the host calling Fred's motel room.

I hate to tell you this, but we're going to have to cancel this morning's session. Can't tell about the evening. But things look pretty bad. Nobody saw this coming. City's not ready. Plows, not ready. Crews, not ready. Nothing's ready. Worse yet, nothing's open. In fact, I'm stuck in my driveway, meaning that I can't come down to fetch you.

So I don't know what you are going to do about breakfast. But I do have an idea. If you can make it out of your room, walk down to the corner ... turn right ... go one block ... turn right again ... and you should be standing

within shouting distance of the bus station. There's a little café there. And if any place is gonna be open, it's gonna be open.

So Fred curses his luck, zips up his jacket, busts out his door, and goes in search of the little café. Two rights. Bus station. There it is. Wonder of wonders, it's open. But it's also crowded. It seems as if every stranded soul in the universe is crammed inside.

There is no place to sit. But some guy slides down the bench and makes room for Fred to squeeze in. Waiter comes over ... big burly guy ... non-shaven ... wearing half the kitchen on his apron. "Whatcha want?" he snarls. "Can I see a menu?" Fred asks. "Don't need no menu," the waiter answers. "Didn't get no deliveries this morning. All we got is soup." "Well then," says Fred, "soup it is. I like a little breakfast soup from time to time."

So the soup comes in a rather tallish mug. Looks awful. Shade of gray. Color of a mouse. Fred half-wonders if that's what it could be ... cream of mouse. So he doesn't eat it. But he does use the mug as a stove ... cupping his fingers around it ... warming them on it.

Which is when the door opens once more. Wind howls. Cold surges. "Shut the blankety-blank door," someone shouts. A lady enters. Thin coat. No hat. Ice crystals in her hair and eyebrows. Maybe 40. Painfully skinny.

"Whatcha want?" shouts the guy with the greasy apron. "I'll just have a glass of water," she answers. "Look lady," he says. "We're crowded in here. We don't give no glasses of water. Either you order something or you leave."

Well, it quickly becomes apparent that she isn't able to buy something. So she rebuttons her coat and commences to leave. Whereupon a funny thing happens. One by one, everybody at her table gets up to leave, too. Followed by others ... at other tables. Even Fred (who still hasn't touched his soup) gets up to leave.

"All right ... all right," says the soup master. "She can stay." And he brings her a bowl of soup. With order restored, Fred turns to his table mate and says: "Who is she? She must be somebody important." To which the guy says: "Never saw her before in my life. But I kinda figure if she's not welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Which pretty much settled the matter, to the point where all you could hear (for the next few minutes) were soup spoons clinking against the sides of the mugs. Even Fred broke down and ate his soup. Which wasn't half bad, really. Some might even call it tasty.

Later on, he still couldn't shake the taste ... as if he'd had it before. But what was it? He couldn't remember. For the life of him, he couldn't remember. Then it hit him. Strangest thing, really. That cream of mouse soup tasted, for all the world, like bread and wine. That was it ... for all the world like bread and wine." (William A. Ritter, quoting Fred Craddock)

Jesus said today, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be blessed at the resurrection of the righteous." There are a lot of people in our communities and in our world that are not on our radar. People just waiting to be loved and accepted for who they are, as children of God. And Jesus says for us to go invite them in. Bring them in and love them as he loves them. Honor them as he honors them. Feed them. Clothe them, fight for them, see them, serve them, find a way, break traditions, let something new happen, and spread the word that ALL are welcome.

This is the Kingdom way of doing things. I don't know if we'll like it or not but that's our problem I guess. Don't forget that I warned you what might happen if you invited Jesus to the party. Bon appétit my friends! Bon appétit! Amen.