

Luke 14: 12-24

He 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. But 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 repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ 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 regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ 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.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ 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. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

The Welcome Table. A sermon for World Communion Sunday October 7, 2018

There’s an old spiritual I remember that goes like this. *Oh, I’m gonna set down at the welcome table, yes, I’m gonna set down at the welcome table some o’ dese days, Hallelujah! I’m gonna set down at the welcome table, I’m a gonna set down at the welcome table some o’ dese days.*

I was visiting my grandchildren this week and just before we sat down to dinner that evening, my youngest granddaughter, who is seven years old, asked me if she could come to our house for Thanksgiving. “Your food is so good!” she said. And her daddy loves the gravy I make. Of course, she has an open invitation for Thanksgiving or anytime for that matter. Now, I wasn’t planning to start thinking about Thanksgiving quite this early, but I guess it is nearly time for some of us. It also brings to mind the joy of gathering with family and friends around the table, sharing good food and fellowship, even with those that can annoy the heck out of you. You know who you are!

But despite all that, there is often a sense of unity that comes from eating and cooking together and I think Jesus knew that too. There are so many stories of Jesus eating with others in the Gospel aren’t there? Why, in the Gospel of Luke, there are at least 10 stories of Jesus eating and sharing a meal with others. And it isn’t always with the cream of the crop, is it? Tax collectors, sinners, uninvited women of questionable background, foreigners, those deemed unclean. He ate with unwashed hands, dirty disciples, dirty feet, Zacchaeus the short and laughable tax man, with 4 or 5 thousand at a time, and gathered all together at one fateful Passover meal. Even after his resurrection he broke bread with those two surprised followers on the road to Emmaus, a group of frightened disciples locked in an upper room, and cooked breakfast on the beach on an early morning for some of his closest friends. Peter was willing to swim to shore for that meal. Maybe they too might have said, “Your food is so good Jesus!” Can we come for Thanksgiving?

Theology Professor Barry Jones in his commentary said, “I’m convinced that our dinner tables have the potential to be the most “missional” places in all of our lives. Perhaps before we invite people to Jesus or invite them to church, we should invite them to dinner. If table fellowship is a spiritual discipline that is vital for shaping and sustaining our life with God for the world, we need to make a point to share our tables with people who are in our lives but far from God. This was one of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus’s ministry.” (2002)

Food brings us together in the most fundamental of ways and that is very much at the heart of what we are celebrating today as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. According to *The Presbyterian Outlook*: World Communion Sunday (originally called World Wide Communion Sunday) is a gift of the Presbyterian Church to the larger ecumenical church. The first celebration occurred at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1933 where Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr served as pastor.

It was their attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another. When asked how the idea of World Communion Sunday spread from that first service to the world-wide practice of today, Dr. Kerr replied,

“The concept spread very slowly at the start. People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

I love that phrase, “*trying to hold the world together.*” That by the sharing of this meal we hold together, in Christ’s love and God’s mercy. A place where all are welcome and included in the promise. That unity can be found at the dinner table.

Haywood Street United Methodist Church in Asheville is a mission congregation and faith-based nonprofit founded in 2009 by Rev. Brian Combs. Each week on Wednesday and Sunday they offer sit down meals for the homeless and displaced folks in the community. They partner with local restaurants and chefs to provide a meal that is not only beautiful but served in an atmosphere of respect and dignity. You don’t have to pay or do anything for the meal. It is a gift of God for the people of God so to speak. Here is how they describe what they do...

“*The Downtown Welcome Table* rests on the assumption that food is a primary means of grace, a way to love and connect. It is a homemade meal served on abundant plates by an attentive wait staff. Lunch and dinner are served family style and folks are invited to linger over the meal as in a nice restaurant or dinner at home. Cloth napkins, flowers on the table, and china plates send the message “you deserve the very best” and are meant to counter the notion often held by those living on the streets that handouts, hand-me-downs and leftovers are all I deserve. Never intending to be a soup kitchen or feeding line, we want our meal to be a crossroads of diverse community, a gathering of disparate folks, a fork and spoon invitation to prince and pauper alike. People who might not otherwise come to know each other develop a friendship over a shared meal.”

This is a compelling ministry, isn’t it? One that I think might qualify as holding the world together...

And I think the most important part of the story this morning is that we are reminded again that all are welcome in the Kingdom of God. That all are welcome at this feast, this party. Jesus invited everyone. Some chose not to come, but the invitation still stands. 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.

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? Who is welcome in our churches and at this table?

I want to leave you with this wonderful story shared about theologian and preacher Fred Craddock which I've shared before but one that always speaks to the inclusive love of God, a story that I hope you will never tire of hearing even though it brings us significant challenges. It went like this.

"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, All, **All**, are welcome. This is the Good News! Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Prayer for World Communion Sunday

God of all creation, we give You thanks that we are all made in Your image, with such rich diversity. On this day we are joined together with the faithful around the world. As we break bread together, we remember that we are still one body in You, even though we have different languages, cultures and traditions, different ways of worshipping, praying and praising.

In unity we drink the cup together of hope, of new life, knowing that Your will is for Your people to be one body. And though we are one body, yet we are not the same—we are young and old, rich and poor, those who work with our hands and hard labor, we are those who work with our minds and pens, we are those who work with our hearts and compassion. We are those still figuring out who we are.

And we are those who remember to pray for others not only here at home but those who are far from us, living in despair or anguish, poverty and scarcity, those fleeing for safety and those mourning deep loss and tragedy. Comfort them all Loving God with your healing presence and bring quickly the safety so needed by all.

We remember also those who seek to help. Those who put themselves in harm's way to bring relief and comfort, warm meals and places to sleep, a kind word and a cool drink of water, those who defend the rights of the weak. O loving God, bless and sustain those who risk and give for others.

And we lift up those here in our community who are dear to us, those who need healing and those who need encouragement. Those who mourn and those who are struggling with faith, life, and living, and ask that you hear now the prayers of our hearts both spoken and silent...

Steadfast God, our world is ever-turning, ever-changing. What we know today we did not always know, and what comes tomorrow may completely surprise us. Help us to be open to the movement of Your Spirit in our lives and in our world. May our hearts be open to love, and our minds be open to change. May we ourselves be open to welcome others to Your table, for You are the one who welcomes us. And for that we go into the world rejoicing and looking for your presence in all people, offering our prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray saying...