

Our reading from the Greek Scriptures comes from the Gospel of Luke. While eating at the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath Jesus challenged the norms of his host and the guests four times! Jesus has already healed a man on the Sabbath—challenging everyone to consider whether healing, saving, is more important than the command not to “work” on the Sabbath. Then he spoke about the humility guests should display at dinners such as theirs by sitting at a lower place than their rank at the table. Quickly he turned to the duty of the host to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind instead of their family, friends and colleagues, who were sitting at table that day, in order to fulfill biblical hospitality. Jesus teaches that hospitality and generosity are to be given without expecting anything in return. He ends, “you will be blessed [for your hospitality and humility]...for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. The last challenge he issues at the dinner is today’s text and it comes in the form of a parable responding to a guest’s platitude, a saying, to ease the room’s tension.

Luke 14:15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing Jesus’ teachings, 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!

“The Great Banquet”

Jesus’ parable of the great dinner or banquet clearly relates that all kinds of people are welcome to come to God’s table. In fact we are to welcome people who are different from us, even to beg them to join us in experiencing God’s great banquet.

Is there anyone you would hesitate to invite to church?

Is there anyone you think might not be welcome?

I believe our ability to invite others into our faith community is hindered because we are not sure if the whole of who we are is welcome. If we aren’t sure we’re fully welcome, then how can we have the confidence to invite others to the banquet feast?

Fred Craddock has written, “In the kingdom [at the great banquet] God is host, and who can repay God? Jesus is therefore calling for kingdom behavior, that is, inviting to table those with neither property nor place in society. Since God is host of us all, we as hosts are really behaving as guests, making no claims, setting no conditions, expecting no return.” The word translated “hospitality” in the scriptures literally means “love of a stranger”—this is what God has done for us through Jesus! The Spirit calls together Host and guests to sit at table together! “The clear sign of acceptance, of recognizing others as one’s equals, of cementing fellowship, is breaking bread together. This parable yells to the church “No one is a project!” We are all God’s guests of grace, given new life through faith.¹

In a reflection called “Party Time,” Susan Jones remarked, “We know a party when we see one. But we also know that not all parties are the same. Like the towels in the guest bathroom that are there to be admired but never touched, some parties focus more on display than on people. Other parties are known more for who is not invited than who is. Some parties are held to celebrate, others to commiserate. As diverse as parties can be, they all have one thing in common: their purpose and tone are set by the host.”²

God is the host of the great dinner Jesus tells us about and God has chosen to make a radical invitation. The Host has opened the banquet feast to the streets---and even beyond the city walls---to those previously locked outside the gates at night! The table is spread for all to come regardless of their stature, physical appearance, skills or economic standing in society.

So what keeps you from coming to the great banquet, from coming to church, as you are? What holds us back from celebrating God’s gift of nourishment, healing grace and love? What can and can’t we bring to church?

We are going to enter a meditative time for reflection on how welcome we feel bringing all that we are to church. You are invited to make table tents with qualities about yourself on them (about three each). I’ve made some as examples. Then we are going to show symbolically which parts of ourselves feel welcome, for whatever reason, and which parts feel less welcome. If we feel we can bring a quality openly to church we’ll place our tent close to the communion table or even on it. If the quality is one that we do not feel is welcomed at church or it has been made uncomfortable at some point, the quality goes farther away from the communion table.

After you’ve placed your own qualities, you are invited to walk around the whole space and notice what the tents say and where they are. Children are welcome to participate, adults can help them! I’ll illustrate this sacred journey through sharing and placing my qualities.

- “Minister” (on table as you all voted me in and have welcomed me)
- “The Only Single Young Working Adult” (Middle, no community of my own age, yet not ostracized)
- “Questioner/Seeker” (near back-It’s been my experience with the church, any church, that too much seeking and questioning will get you snubbed for not being “faithful” or “believing” correctly!)
- “Newcomer” (near table, I feel welcome as a new person to the area, it is ok to be a transplant here)

Please take three table tents and a writing instrument. Discern some of your defining qualities and judge how comfortable you are with bringing them to church. Then place them and walk around in silence, reflecting on what others have written.

(5-8 minutes for reflection)

Come, wander back to your seats, for “everything is ready now.”

“We remember that on the night Jesus was betrayed, he invited his disciples to share a meal with him, people who were not perfect, people who made mistakes, people who were confused, people who often didn’t get it when Jesus told them something, even people with the capacity to betray Jesus. But he invited them. He invited this imperfect, searching group of people to his table--every part of them, even the parts that they weren’t proud of or didn’t understand, was invited to join him at the feast! In the same way Jesus invites us, today to bring all of ourselves to his table to receive.”³

As we stand and sing “I Come with Joy” our ushers and communion servers are going to gather all of our qualities, all of these parts of ourselves from every corner of the room, and bring them to their rightful place of welcome on the Lord’s Table.

(All the table tents were gathered and the congregation celebrated the Lord’s Supper together) Amen.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Luke*. Ed. James L. Mays. (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990) 177-180.

² "Party Time," Susan Pendleton Jones. Commentary from *The Christian Century*, September, 1999. At *Religion Online*.

³ This quote and the general idea for this communal interactive sermon time came from Session Six, “Who’s Invited?” which can be found in *Talking Faith: An Eight-Part Study on Growing and Sharing Your Faith* by Heather Kirk-Davidoff and Nancy Wood-Lyczak (Chalice Press: St. Louis, MO, 2004). I also want to thank the Rev. Ellen Johnson who shared the use of this book with me in her congregations.