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Luke 14:15-24
A Place at the Table: Invitation to the Table

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Luke 14:15-24 The Message

 That triggered a response from one of the guests: “How fortunate the one who gets to eat dinner in God’s kingdom!” Jesus followed up. “Yes. For there was once a man who threw a great dinner party and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests, saying, ‘Come on in; the food’s on the table.’ “Then they all began to beg off, one after another making excuses. The first said, ‘I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.’ “Another said, ‘I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.’ “And yet another said, ‘I just got married and need to get home to my wife.’ “The servant went back and told the master what had happened. He was outraged and told the servant, ‘Quickly, get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and wretched you can lay your hands on, and bring them here.’  “The servant reported back, ‘Master, I did what you commanded—and there’s still room.’  “The master said, ‘Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full! Let me tell you, not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party.’”

I love to receive an invitation. It seems like I am receiving more evites by email than actual invitations that arrive in the mailbox. But I love to open them however they arrive. I recently received an invitation to my cousin’s wedding in Boston in August. I could tell as soon as I looked through the mail that this was a special envelope. It was heavier and I couldn’t wait to open it and read all the details. When you receive an invitation you want to make sure that you have all of the details correct. Who, what, where, when and of course, what to wear!

In our parable, we read about a host, a dinner party, and the guests. Now, the first guests the host invited refused to come—a response that was completely unexpected! But, the host did not give up. The messengers were sent out again and instructed to go into the city streets and alleys and round up anyone who looks like are hungry, the misfits and the homeless and the wretched. I wonder what those folks were thinking when they heard the invitation from the messenger. Everything is ready and just waiting for them to come. I can just imagine them smelling their favorite foods and not believing that it was really happening to them. What generosity. What absolutely unmerited, outrageously extravagant, unbelievably deep grace.

There is still room at the party, so the messengers are instructed to go to the country roads, and drag in whoever they find. It doesn’t sound very welcoming, no one wants to be dragged to a party, but you get the idea. The host wants a full house!

 There are no special qualifications needed; no exclusive memberships required; no secret passwords. It isn’t about who you know. There are no references needed. There is just an amazing invitation to a feast. It is an opportunity to find our place at God’s table, alongside others willing to accept the invitation without asking who else will be there. Do we accept the amazing invitation with thankful and open hearts?

 I have a friend who was having a very difficult time at a new job. She had just moved to that community and her job needed to work out. But it wasn’t. She tried harder and harder and it was only getting worse. So, she looked for another job knowing that would mean a new home, new schools for her kids, another move. I talked to her Friday and she is so relieved that she was willing to embrace her fear. She didn’t know what the next step was, she just knew that something had to change because she was so unhappy. She was filled with fear and anger and she heard God calling to her. She has a new job, her house has sold in record time, her kids are already signed up for the new school, and she feels hope for the first time in a long time.

You might be thinking that you don’t have time for a feast. You may think that you are too busy and you will eat later. In the midst of our anxiety, in the midst of our worry, in the midst of our bill-paying and doctor visits and appointments, God invites us. We might think that we will just get a sandwich between errands or eat a snack while we are driving as we check email and text and work on today’s big project. God is making the feast and God is encouraging us not to just grab a bite. Stop, sit, stay for a while. We are invited, we are welcome. We are worthy. It is up to us to respond to God.

Two weeks ago the Associate Pastor at Wilshire Baptist just down the road, Mark Wingfield, wrote an article about transgender folks, “7 Things this Baptist Pastor is learning about transgender people.”[[1]](#footnote-2) He started out by saying he didn’t know much about transgender issues, but he is trying to learn. He said he didn’t know anyone who was transgender, or at least he didn’t think that he did. This week he wrote a follow up article because that first article went viral and has been read by more than 1 million people. In the past two weeks he has corresponded with 400 people, mostly in positive exchanges, about that first article.

One of the emails that he received was from a transgender woman who shared her story and signed it with the words, “Sincerely, a woman who hopes that God still loves her.” He said that most transgender persons are not against God; many just fear that God is against them. Or, more specifically, they believe the church is against them. Many of them — a vast number in fact — have grown up in the church and are people of deep faith. But they are people who have been asked not to come back, have been removed from membership, have been shunned. And so have their families.

He shared the story of a single mom with four kids. One of the kids is transgender. The entire family was kicked out of their church. The pastor accused the mom of child abuse for letting her boy dress as a girl. The mom wanted to give church another try, and was asking for advice on how to find a church that was more accepting.

Rev. Wingfield said a line that cut me to the core. He said, “the transgender community was immediately kinder to me than the church has been to them.” In the church we are more often known for what we are against rather than who God is for. Rev. Wingfield talked about the phrase, “Bring your whole self to work.” Jesus would say, “Bring your whole self to church.” But that is dangerous because we think that we have to fit the image of a perfect Christian. “We say, ‘Come as you are,’ but we really mean, ‘Come as we are.’”[[2]](#footnote-3)

We might struggle with depression or financial insecurity or food insecurity and we feel like we can’t share that with our church family. We only want to talk about the happy stuff when we come to church. Jesus is much more about who is included rather than who is excluded.[[3]](#footnote-4)

All are born in God’s image. As the pastor at Greenland Hills UMC it is my privilege to be in ministry with all people in this place. We are a reconciling congregation which means we believe in the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons with The United Methodist Church. All are invited, all are welcome, all are affirmed, all are worthy. It is up to us to respond.

 “How fortunate the one who gets to eat dinner in God’s kingdom!” Jesus invited all to the table of love, especially those considered outsiders by many. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, touched the untouchable and encouraged us to do likewise. There is this connection between the food we eat at the Communion table and the call to create a better world for all people.

I love that song, “Here I Am Lord.” One of the verses says, “I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame. I will set a feast for them, My hand will save. Finest bread I will provide, Till their hearts be satisfied. I will give My life to them, Whom shall I send?” And the chorus answers, “Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night. I will go Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.”

The invitation to Communion says these words, “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. You don’t have to have your faith all figured out before you take Communion. This meal is for you if you are overcome with doubt or fear or anger at God. This meal is for you if you have not yet come to faith or feel like you have lost your faith. We do not have it all figured out yet. We may be wavering in faith or wracked with guilt. But we are seeking an encounter with the Christ and we want to experience God’s presence.

There is a story of Ronald and Nancy Reagan who were entertaining very special guests. The day before the guests were to arrive, Nancy Reagan was preparing the guest room and she laid out some towels with a note saying, "If you use these I will murder you." The note was meant for her husband, Ronald Reagan. In the excitement of her guests' arrival, Nancy forgot to remove the note and after the guests had come and gone, she discovered the towels, still in perfect order, as well as the note itself. Jesus welcomes us to the Communion table with open arms. He sets a place for us at his table and accepts us as we are and challenges us to be better.

Kenda Creasy Dean has written a book called Almost Christian. Her book is based on the most comprehensive study of youth and religion that has ever been done. But it’s not just a book about youth ministry, because Dean rightly points out that we see—or don’t see—in the faith of our youth a direct reflection of the church as a whole.

She suggests that an essential element of faith formation for youth—and adults—is the ability to know, understand, and articulate the creed of one’s faith community. But more than a statement of faith to be memorized and recited by rote, what Dean means is that we need to be able to tell the God-story of our faith. When we share in the Great Thanksgiving in our Communion liturgy we are telling the God-story of our faith. Not the story of the United Methodist Church, not the story of Greenland Hills, we are telling the story of God. We remember the Biblical story from creation through Christ and then bring that story into the present lives of us as we share this sacred meal. The Word becomes flesh, flesh becomes bread, bread that is broken and given for us. All are welcome to this table to taste the goodness of God.

1. http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/latest-columns/20160516-mark-wingfield-7-things-this-baptist-pastor-is-learning-about-transgender-people.ece [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This paragraph is taken from: https://baptistnews.com/article/painful-lessons-from-a-pastors-viral-transgender-post/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This paragraph is taken from: https://baptistnews.com/article/painful-lessons-from-a-pastors-viral-transgender-post/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)