

October 15, 2017 – The Guest List

Luke 14:15-24

How many of you have ever hosted a dinner party? (*wait for response*) I ask that question knowing that Thanksgiving has just past and many of us are still suffering from food hangovers after huge holiday feasts. Yes, most of us have hosted a dinner party at some point in our lives. So when you host a dinner party who do you usually invite? (*wait for answers – friends, family, someone who you may otherwise be alone*) What kind of criteria do you use to decide the guest list? (*wait for answers – people who will fit in, people who will get along, etc*) There are lots of things to consider... aren't there.

In today's scripture passage Jesus is a guest at the home of one of the leading Pharisees. In Jesus' time, Pharisees were middle-income educated people who knew the Jewish laws and who were involved in making sure everyone else followed them. Jesus was often getting in trouble with the Pharisees for not following their rules around working on the Sabbath, or for eating with outsiders or talking to Samaritans. It makes me wonder how he even got on the guest list for this particular dinner.

During the meal, someone said to Jesus, "Happy are those who eat bread in the kingdom of God!" and Jesus responded with a story or parable about another dinner. He said, "A landowner was giving a large dinner and sent out many invitations." Now we don't know who these invitations went to. We can guess that the landowner invited his neighbours and his friends. He probably invited

people of a similar class, those who also had property and a certain amount of wealth. What we do know is that when the meal was ready, everyone he invited had an excuse for not coming. They were the type of excuses that you would expect from people of means: one had some land that he just purchased and he wanted to check it out, another had bought a yoke of oxen and he needed to see how they would work together and yet another had just gotten married and was no doubt still on his honeymoon.

When he heard that no one was coming to his dinner the landowner got quite angry and he told his employee, "Go into town, into the streets and the alleys, and bring in those who are poor or crippled, and those who are blind or lame. " When this was complete and there was still room at the table he said, "Go out and scour the side roads and the back roads and make them come in. I want my house to be full! But I tell you, not one of those that I had initially invited will taste a bite of my dinner!

You can read books full of commentaries that attempt to interpret what Jesus was saying with this parable. Most scholars believe that it was a warning to the wealthy and powerful people who were sitting with him at the Pharisee's home. It was a warning that they were going to miss out on their opportunity to be part of God's reign on earth, God's kingdom. Jesus was telling them that they were so busy with their lives, with following their laws, with building their personal wealth and their reputations that they were going miss out on God's reign of peace and justice for all. They were going to miss out on God's banquet of love.

For those of us who can identify with the Pharisees and the other wealthy folk at the dinner, this is an important message. We are often so distracted with our lives that we miss out on the bounty that God has provided, we miss out on the opportunity to be part of God's kingdom of peace and justice, we miss out on God's banquet of love.

But that's a sermon for another day. Today I want to focus instead on the other people in the story: the ones who didn't make the landowner's original guest list, the ones who were invited at the last minute, the ones who, in the end, got to partake of the landowner's feast. Who were these people? Who are these people? They are those with less income, the differently abled, the homeless, the foreigner, the drag queen, the lesbian couple – people on the margins of society.

As most of you know, our church is currently going through an Affirming Ministry Process. This is a process in which we explore how we can more fully commit to our already existing values of hospitality, inclusiveness, acceptance, respect and justice for all. One of things that we are discovering through this process is that being an Affirming Ministry goes beyond merely welcoming or even inviting all people. You see words like welcoming or inviting or including suggest that those on the inside of the church have the power to choose to accept those on the outside. But that is not really the case. You see, a church is not a landowner's dinner table, it's not a closed community, it's not a private club and we are not the gatekeepers. In the church, by God's grace, everyone – including

those on the margins – is already invited to the banquet. God’s guest list has no exclusions.

I know that may be a difficult concept for most of us to grasp. We are all used to thinking of this building and this faith community as “ours.” Usually being members of a community means that we have rights and privileges beyond those who are not members. But in the church, the only right that membership gives us is the right to vote on certain matters, like calling a new minister or starting a large capital project. In all other things, we have no more say or power, or privilege than the person standing on the street corner. Those of us who are already here are the caretakers of this house. We have the joy of a sense of belonging and we have the privilege of creating a space that will be a place of nurture for all.

The Affirming Ministry Committee started last spring by gathering feedback from you, the congregation, and out of that feedback the committee determined that we would begin our process with a focus on differing physical abilities and issues of accessibility in our church. In September we held a Circle Conversation to give you a chance to talk about these issues and just this week our Accessibility Working Group met to discuss ways that we can improve the physical structure of our building in order to make it more welcoming for those with differing physical abilities.

In order to continue the conversation that has already started, I am going to invite you to take a moment to really look at this space in which we are gathering. Think about all the differing abilities that people could bring to this space: limited sight, hearing loss, limited movement, wheelchairs, walkers, canes and the list can go on. Consider the barriers to full participation in worship that exist for these people. Feel free to go beyond this room as well to other parts of our church building. Think about these barriers and then turn to someone beside you and take a couple of minutes to talk about the things that you have observed. If possible turn to someone that you didn't come with or someone who isn't related to you. Talk about the issues. Maybe even come up with some solutions. I invite you to begin now.

Thank you for your conversations. Let's just take a moment to hear some of the ideas that you discussed. (*wait for responses*) I am going to invite you take the sticky notes that are located in your pews, and write down any thoughts, concerns or ideas that you discussed during this. You can put those sticky notes on the offering plates or you can stick them on the bulletin board at the back of the sanctuary as you leave to go to lunch.

Thank you so much for helping us improve the accessibility of our building so that when all God's people receive their invitation to the banquet they will come and find a place at the table prepared especially for them.