

## “There is Still Room at the Table”

Luke 14: 12-22

A funny thing happened to me on the way to the post office on Tuesday of this past week. Not funny ha-ha, but funny as in it made me uncomfortable. On Tuesday afternoon, I stepped out of the outside office door and there was someone partaking of the items from our Blessing Box. Please hear me say I was not uncomfortable because the person was there. I am glad that he was using the Blessing Box. I'm glad that our presence of Welcome is available 24/7. The reason I was uncomfortable was because I never know how I am to respond when I come upon someone partaking of the blessing box. Does the person not want me to see them so that they can remain anonymous... because maybe they are embarrassed? Maybe things were tight this week and it took all this person's courage to come to partake of the items in the blessing box and now I have added to this person's stress and embarrassment. On the other hand, does the person want to be seen, want to be spoken with because after all, he or she is a person and we are called to see them as Beloved children of God first and foremost? I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should go back inside or take steps forwards. I'm sure I presented a comical picture at that moment, almost as if I was doing the liturgical hokey pokey.

Then thankfully, this gentleman settled my indecision. He simply turned around to me and said “Hello!” I responded and we talked for a while. Then both of us went on our way.

Now this easily could have been a moment which got lost in the craziness of my week but...but it stayed with me, constantly playing in the back of my mind for both good and bad reasons. Bad reason...all week I have felt like a hypocrite because on Sundays, I preach grace and love but then on Tuesday, I wavered in the practice of these things. Good reason. On Sundays, I preach grace and love and then on Tuesday I was reminded how often we complicate the issues when in reality, showing grace and love can be so simple. It can be as simple as seeing someone in our midst, offering a smile and saying hello. It can be as simple as seeing others who are often ignored or forgotten. It can be as simple as sharing an invitation to come to the table because after all, we know there is still room at the table for all of God’s children to come and partake in the grace and love of God.

I can’t help but think this God moment happened this week for a reason. It happened for a purpose, to remind us why we gather at God’s Table to celebrate World Communion Sunday, why we gather to experience the ripple effects of God’s grace and love filling our world. To add to the healing and reconciliation which does happen after, which does happen because we invited others to come to the Table. I can’t help but think this God moment happened this week to remind us

again why we break the bread of life and drink from the cup of the new covenant, coming together with all our brothers and sisters in faith from around the world to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, no matter what this world might say. It is almost too overwhelming to contemplate and take in as people of faith.

Think about it: By the time we started our worship service, communities of faith in other parts of the world have already had communion. They have already begun the process of filling this world with the Light of Christ. They have sent ripples of God's grace and love into this world, sending them to our shores as we prepare to gather at the Table. Then by the time we finish our worship service, other communities of faith will be just beginning their time around the Lord's Table. They will be greeted by our hopes, our prayers, our light of Christ as they are welcomed to the Table. It amazes me to ponder that for at least one Sunday, we as the broken and often divided Body of Christ here on Earth intentionally come together to say that this is God's Table, not our table and yes there is still room at the Table for all of God's children.

Think of the power of that statement. In this world where so many are feeling like they don't have a voice, where so many are feeling like they are not welcomed, like they are ignored or forgotten, in this world, where it seems like power and might always win, think of this act of faith, of coming together with people from around the world, coming together as people of faith, as the Body of

Christ here on Earth, proclaiming that anything is possible through the grace and love of God, that it is the ordinary things of our lives, the moments around our kitchen table, our fellowship hall tables, moments around the food pantry's table and the homeless shelters' tables, it is the ordinary things like wheat from the field and grapes from the vine which have the power to transform this world, which has the power to show this world that there is another way. Think about the power of that faith statement.

Because you see, more often than not, communion has been the practice which divides the Body of Christ rather than unites it. Each denomination, each community of faith does communion differently. Some take it weekly while others only gather for communion monthly or even quarterly. There are also sticking points between churches, between denomination about who is allowed to partake and who is not, is the priest/preacher involved or is it laity, is it the real body and blood of Christ or just representations. These are just to name a few of the human barriers we have placed around God's Table. Wars have been fought over these sticking points. Communities of faith have divided over these sticking points. Long theological documents have been written over these sticking points. Yet it is probably one of our only faith practice out of all our faith practices as the wider Church which has the power to call us back time and time again. It is probably one of our only faith practices out of all our faith practices as the wider church which

constantly reminds us how simple acts of grace and love can truly be, not only for us but for all of God's creation.

Which is why Luke's parable is such an appropriate text for this Sunday. It contradicts all the barriers we as people of faith try to put around God's Table. It shows us how foolish we really are when we play by the rules of the world and not allow the values of the Kingdom of God to shape us, to transform us as people of faith. Luke's parable calls us to remember just exactly whose Table it is in the first place and why we come to it in the first place as the people of God.

This parable is the fourth and last unit set at a table in the house of a Pharisee. (Side note: Do you notice how much of Jesus' ministry actually takes place around a table?) Maybe it is truly time we realize the impact the table has on our mission and ministry here on Earth as we work to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Ok, back to the context of this parable: Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he is invited to a dinner. No surprise. Jesus has made quite an impression with all his teachings and preachings along the way. At this dinner, Jesus observes that instead of hosting being used as a welcome, rather it is used as an act of power, meaning that the host has tried to gain power over others and put them in his debt by only inviting those who would be able to give something back to him in return.

Jesus sees this and then tells this shocking parable. This parable turns our world upside down, reminding us that at the table, and in life, God is our host and we will never be able to repay God for all that God has done for us. We are not invited to the table because we earned it, nor because we deserve it, not even because God is trying to put us into debt to God. God invites us because of who God is. God invites us because God wants to be in relationship with us. God invites us because there is still room at table even for grumpy, imperfect, beautifully made in the image of God people like you and me.

Or let me say it this way... Fred Craddock, the renowned Disciples preacher liked to share a story of his early years in ministry. "Many years ago, when Fred Craddock was a young preacher out of seminary, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. At that time, Oak Ridge was rapidly expanding. Lots of people were moving to town to help in the construction work. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. The trailer park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought his church ought to reach out to them. So at the next Board meeting Fred recommended a plan to reach out to the newcomers. "Oh, I don't know" said the chairman of the board. "They might not fit in here very well." Fred said, "But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us." But Fred got resistance to the idea. They finally decided to table

the discussion and deal with it at their next business meeting. At that meeting a member said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church you have to own property in the county." "I'll second that motion," said another man. Fred was mortified and spoke against it. But in the end, the motion passed. As a result, no effort was made to reach out to the newcomers. Soon thereafter Fred left that church. Twenty years later, Fred and his wife were driving past Oak Ridge on a trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church, his wife had never seen it. So Fred decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred told his wife that painful story about the church refusing to reach out to newcomers. It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area. But they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. There was a big parking lot out front full of cars, trucks, motor homes and even motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot they saw a big sign in front of the church. It said, "BBQ: All You Can Eat." It was a restaurant! Fred and his wife went inside and the place was packed with all kinds of people—white and black and Hispanic. Rich and poor. Southerners and northerners. Fred said to his wife, "It's a good thing this isn't a church anymore. If it were, these people would not be allowed in."

You see, it is not enough to know that we have an invitation to the feast and for us to simply show up when the dinner is ready. Our call as followers of Jesus

Christ pushes us beyond that. It transforms us. It helps us realize that until everyone comes to the feast, we cannot celebrate because our joy is not complete. The Kingdom of God has never been about us simply showing up. It has always been about us being in relationship with our God, being in relationship with neighbors, being in the relationship with the people who don't look like, who don't think like us, who don't act like us.

"When we enter into relationship with Christ, we are called into a deeper relationship with others. We are called to see the needs of our neighbor and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Christian faith is not something we can pay lip service to; it requires a transformation of our lives. When we follow Jesus and look to helping our neighbors, we engage in the work of God's Kingdom. We become partners in the more often than not, frustratingly difficult work of grace and love of the Kingdom of God]."

Luke reminds us through his parable just how amazing a gift God's grace really is. Because as we all know... Grace is not an exclusive privilege. It is a gift given to each and every one of God's Beloved children. God's grace changes us. It transforms us. It helps us respond to God's call with integrity and hope.

So knowing this, today and all days, may we respond to the gift of God's grace, not simply by showing up at the feast, but by working to make sure the welcome is wide for all of God's people. Amen.