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“How to Plan a Banquet”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

On February 1, 1960, a young African American man, Ezell Blair, Jr., and three North Carolina A & T College students went down to the classiest intersection of downtown Greensboro, walked into Woolworth’s, bought some school supplies, sat down at the lunch counter, and ordered a doughnut and coffee.

“I’m sorry, we don’t serve colored here,” the waitress said. Blair pointed out that she was mistaken and held up his receipt from a nearby cash register. The young men stayed on their stools until the manager turned off the lights thirty minutes before closing time.

Earlier that day, Ezell Blair had said to his mother, “Mom, we are going to do something today that may change history, that may change the world.”¹ This young college student had figured out what other leaders of the burgeoning civil rights movement had not yet discovered, but it was an insight that would propel the movement forward and indeed change the world. What did he figure out? That true equality would only be achieved when whites and blacks could sit together at one table. The first signs of the Kingdom are always revealed at table.²

¹ Diane McWorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, as quoted in sermon by my friend Chris Joiner, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, TN

²Chris Joiner, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, from his sermon on the same text.

This insight is not original with the civil rights movement, of course. In Luke's Gospel, every time a meal is shared, something of the Kingdom is revealed.³ In the case of today's text, we find Jesus sitting at an unlikely table, the table of the head of the Pharisees. How he got there, the gospel doesn't say. Maybe he was invited because the church leaders wanted to keep an eye on him—after all, he did have some unorthodox ideas about the way religious folk were to live and be.

They gather on the Sabbath. When they arrive at the host's home, Jesus begins to watch the other guests. He sees how they jockey for their places at the table, so he offers them a bit of advice: "Don't take the best seats in the house when you arrive and risk the disgrace of being moved to a less important seat. Start at the lowest place and then receive the honor when you are invited up by the host." Jesus knows the Kingdom of God comes when people think about others first. In this parable, Jesus teaches that rare human quality—humility—and tells those gathered about the topsy-turvy nature of the Kingdom of God: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." God recognizes true humility and knows the intentions of our hearts.

After instructing the guests at the Sabbath dinner party, Jesus moves straight to a critique of the host and does not mince words: "Don't invite your relatives and rich neighbors," he reprimands his host. "Don't invite those you know will repay you in kind. No. Invite the ones who can't repay you—the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." Sit at table with the ones the world defines as useless or incomplete. Sit at table with the ones considered unworthy. Sit at table with those who would not normally make your guest list.

Jesus invites his host to envision a different kind of banquet, where poor people you have never met sit at places of honor in tattered, smelly clothes, where war vets roll up to the table with what is left of their legs hidden under a blanket, where a blind man's service dog brings him up to an empty seat at the food-laden table. Jesus challenges the host to plan a banquet for the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind—a banquet which looks less like an exclusive guest list and more like a "come one, come all" party. Radical hospitality is what Jesus is talking about, and

³ Ibid.

suddenly, the dinner party he describes starts to look a lot more like the banquet that will be in the Kingdom of Heaven. Suddenly, this dinner party is not about order and hierarchies, privilege and power. The host of this party prepares her tables those who are hungry—really hungry—and who want to be there because it is the banquet table of welcome, hospitality, love, and inclusion.

We should not be surprised that the word “hospitality” means, literally, “love of a stranger.”⁴ Fred Craddock understand this passage to be telling us that:

Here . . . Jesus is not calling on Christians to provide for the needs of the poor and the disabled; he says to invite them to dinner. This is the New Testament’s understanding of hospitality [I]t is not having each other over on Friday evenings but welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return. Nor does this text speak of sending food to anyone; rather, the host and the guest sit at table together. The clear sign of acceptance, or recognizing others as one’s equals, of cementing fellowship, is breaking bread together. In the Christian community no one is a “project.” Do you suppose Jesus was serious about opening church halls and homes in this way?⁵

Some years ago, a Presbyterian church in a nearby town was faced with just such a question when the town homeless shelter came to them with an unusual request. In the late winter of that year, it became clear that the current shelter was not adequate and required renovations. The shelter leaders turned to the faith communities, and they responded. Church and synagogue halls were offered for two-week periods. One faith community provided evening meals each night while others provided overnight housing and morning breakfast bags.

Some faith communities took longer to decide to participate. Some downtown churches had many questions and a number of concerns. “What about safety?” people asked. “How will our preschool program be affected?” “Will we be able to find enough volunteers?” But eventually, the answers became clear. They all agreed—it would take planning, it would take time, but it was the right thing to do.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Series, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*

For two weeks that summer, the Presbyterian church joined other faith communities, opened its doors and offered shelter, cool air, soft bed mats, and refreshments for those who entered.

It wasn't a banquet, exactly, as the men ate their dinner before they arrived, but I believe that church offered these men a place at the table, metaphorically speaking. If you had been present one of those summer evenings, then you would know. You would know about one church member who sat and talked with two men, sharing stories back and forth about their lives. You would know about the 55-year-old woman who played Chinese checkers with five English and Spanish-speaking men, laughing as they jumped over each other's marbles. If you had been present one of these evenings, then you would know about the 33-year-old man who stayed overnight and spent time just hanging out with those men who wanted to stay up and talk. You would know about the member who stood outside with the smokers and talked about life and hardships.

The volunteers at that community and others that summer welcomed God's people into their midst as equals, even though it was not a very easy thing to do. Our first inclination, you see, is often to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. But Jesus came to remind us that we are all one in the sight of God.

My friend, Pastor Chris Joiner, writes:

In the end, we are nothing more [and nothing less] than children of God in need of grace. I am. You are All are children of God and all are welcome at God's Kingdom table. This is what makes the doctrine of God's sovereign grace so radical: it is the great equalizer. If you believe that God created all that is, see and unseen, and if you believe that this God comes to us in grace and we do nothing to earn this divine favor, then all of life becomes an opportunity to say thank you to God by being agents of gracious hospitality to one another.⁶

⁶ This paragraph is adapted from my friend Chris Joiner's sermon, First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee, with his permission.

Recently I read a story written by a woman, a mother, who was serving meals at her church to the homeless in their community. She arrived with lasagna and her four-year-old son, T.J., in tow. As she arranged the food for serving, her son pulled and tugged at her and asked question after question. “What are homeless people? What do they look like? Why are we taking them dinner? Will they talk to me?” And most importantly, “Do they like trains?”

[Later that night, after serving dinner, she writes], I gathered my family and we were walking toward the door when one of the guests started walking alongside us. He was going to the restroom. T.J. decided one new person wasn’t nearly as intimidating as fifteen, so he piped up, “What’s your name?”

“Glenn,” the gentleman answered. “What’s yours?”

“T.J.” He paused. “Do you like trains?” . . .

“Yep,” answered Glenn. And he smiled. A snaggle-toothed grin that could have belonged to any grandfather on this earth. He and my beautiful, cherubic child exchanged some more equally pertinent information. [Then we parted ways.]

On our way home, the barrage of questions flowed forth like a stream. “Where did you say Glenn lives? Why couldn’t we stay and play with Glenn longer? Can we have Glenn over to our house to play?”

The pat, vague, politically correct answers wouldn’t come. Instead, I wanted to ask T.J. the questions. How did you do it, Baby? How did you cut through all the stuff floating around in that room and get to the very essence of this whole experience? What made you think that a tired, hungry, not-so-sweet smelling “homeless person” might be a train-loving human being with whom you could connect on a very real level? Was it really as simple as this? Was it as easy as asking the man his name?⁷

⁷ *Weavings*

For T.J. the answer was easy, I am sure. T.J. became, in that moment, one of the hosts in God’s Kingdom here on earth, welcoming and loving a fellow human being simply because he was.

Friends, we are all invited to be such hosts—radically inclusive hosts who are so grateful and humbled to have been invited to this communion with Christ that we openly share the invitation with all. This is the place where such radical and inclusive hospitality happens. This is the place. Let’s do something here “that may change history, that may change the world.”⁸ What do you say?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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⁸ Ezell Blair quote from the beginning of the sermon.