10/10-11/20 Hospitality at the Table Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 14:7-14 Come to the Table Series

In the Gospel of Luke, we find 10 table stories, 10 meals where Jesus expands God’s welcome and invitation as he broke bread with religious leaders and tax collectors, with the outcast and the unclean, his disciples and women.

Last Sunday, we reflected on how Jesus was revealed at table, and how Jesus revealed the kingdom of God at his tables, through the stories of Jesus’ breaking bread with his disciples at the table of the Last Supper and at the table in Emmaus.

Today, we find Jesus breaking bread with the religious leaders in the house of a prominent Pharisee. While he was being carefully watched, Jesus healed on the Sabbath then told two parables reflecting on God’s welcome.

Hear now the first of those parables, from Luke 14: 7-14…

When I was in high school, I always looked forward to Sunday dinner at Grandma and Grandpa Beatty’s house. On the table would always be some sort of meat and potatoes and vegetable and homemade dessert. My first year in college I would dream about returning home at Christmas just for Grandma’s cooking. At that table I found welcome, even in those awkward teenage years.

There have been other meals in other places that were not as welcoming nor did I look forward to my time around those tables. At my high school reunion, I could often stop the flow of conversation when someone asked what I did for a living and I told them I was a pastor. They then didn’t know what to say to me! I’ve also encountered mixed reactions at wedding receptions. Sometimes I have had wonderful conversations with others; other times I have been ignored. I often will leave once the cake has been eaten before the true party begins, for who really wants to party with their pastor?

Think of times when you have been at table with others, either in small groups or large gatherings. Family meals or corporate dinners; wedding receptions or church potlucks.

When have you felt welcomed? When have you felt excluded? When have you stepped out of your comfort zone to welcome someone you didn’t know?

Years ago, my aunt observed that when she visits various congregations, she has often found that church coffee hours and church meals can be a lonely time for a newcomer. While churches say they are welcoming congregations, in reality many church members get so excited to see one another that they often inadvertently exclude anyone who is new.

In a church our size, with three worship services, we don’t often know everyone. This shyness adds to our hesitancy to welcome one another, fearful we will mistake a lifelong member as a visitor. I give thanks to those of you willing to make new connections with new people, whether they have been here once or for many years.

Wherever we find ourselves today on the continuum between shy and outgoing, between hostile and welcoming, today Jesus invites us all to step outside our comfort zones to receive and to offer hospitality. Hospitality from God and for God. Welcome for and to all God’s beloved children.

Today we are in week two of a four-week series called “Come to the Table.”

Revelation-Hospitality-Enemies-Laughter—all are found at God’s table and also at our tables.

Throughout the Scriptures, and especially in the Gospel of Luke, God’s welcome is offered through table fellowship, a welcome of love and grace, of claiming and calling.

As we reflect on such a welcome, in our worship, in our homes and in small groups, we are then invited to extend that welcome to others.

Today, in the 14th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we find Jesus at table in the house of a prominent Pharisee, one of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus is, after all, a respected rabbi in the Galilee region known for his storytelling. Yet Jesus also knew he was being watched, for he was not a typical rabbi. His actions and teachings brought the word of God to life in a way many did not appreciate. They did not care for his ministry to reach the least, lost and lonely with the welcome, love and saving grace of God.

As Jesus sat at the table of the Pharisee, he observed the actions of those around him. He observed how those who had been invited jockeyed for the positions of honor, yearning to be recognized as better than others.

He also observed who had and had not been invited to the table. Pharisees, lawyers and other leaders of his area were present, those considered powerful and pure. Ordinary men and women were not listed as present in that room that day, including Jesus’ own disciples.

Who was present and how they acted would not have been unexpected in that time and place.

The Pharisees took seriously their role to protect Jewish identity, often through the purity laws.

When a person broke bread with another around the table, that table fellowship signaled a welcome and inclusion of that person. Jews were not to break bread with someone of a different social class, or someone considered unclean, or someone who was not a Jew. The Pharisees would have been very specific in who they invited to the table.

How often do we continue this same line of thinking in our invitations to others? As human beings we are much more comfortable being surrounded by those like us than we are comfortable in a very diverse crowd. That is our human nature.

Invitations to dinners and parties and even wedding receptions are often given because you are expecting a favor, you are returning a favor, or you hope to ask for a favor at some future date.

Naturally when we want to celebrate, even as congregations, we invite those closest to us, our family and friends, those who will not cause a scene or look out of place or challenge our assumptions.

We may say we want to welcome all at our tables, but our actions often tell a different story.

When was the last time you purposefully invited someone to lunch who is on the opposite side of the theological or political spectrum? When was the last time you truly welcomed someone with whom you have nothing else in common except a love of Jesus? When was the last time you struck up a conversation with a stranger?

Jesus knows the human heart. He knows our inclination to gather only with those like us.

He knows our struggle to welcome others.

When Jesus spoke at that Pharisee’s table long ago, he spoke of humility and welcome, of hospitality and care for others. If you feel uncomfortable hearing his words today, imagine how uncomfortable the religious leaders felt around the table that day!

Jesus declared:

Don’t jockey for the place of honor.

Don’t act entitled to certain treatment.

Don’t act like you are better than another.

Do show humility.

Do welcome others not like you.

Do care for those who can never repay your kindness.

..Historians tell about the funeral of Charlemagne, the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages. After his death a mighty funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral at Aix. When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who barred the cathedral door.

"Who comes?" the Bishop asked, as was the custom. "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," proclaimed the Emperor's proud herald.

"Him I know not," the Bishop replied. "Who comes?" The herald, a bit shaken, replied, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth."

"Him I know not," the Bishop said again. "Who comes?" The herald, now completely crushed, responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ."

To which the Bishop, Christ's representative, responded, "Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

 --Alex Gondola, Jr., Come As You Are, CSS Publishing Company, sermons.com

How would our world be different if we truly lived into these words of Jesus?

How would our lives be different if we truly lived into these words of Jesus?

Instead of deciding who sits at the adult table and who sits at the kids table, instead of giving some a seat of honor and others a seat in the back of the room, instead of judging others by social standing, political leanings, finances or race, what would it look like to make room for all God’s children? Would our tables, personal and communal, then look more like God’s table?

Can we picture God’s table including people from all walks of life, all theological perspectives, all backgrounds and ages and races? Or do we only picture God’s table including people like us?

God makes room for you. Can you make room for others?

Those are really the questions Jesus was asking the religious leaders of his day, and asks us to ponder in our day.

First, can we first accept our place at the table of grace? Can we accept that God yearns for us to have a place at the heavenly banquet?

Second, can we make room for others at the table of grace? Can we offer the world a counter-cultural example of diversity rather than division? Can we offer the world a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven here on earth?

Rachel Held Evans once declared:

“This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes.

And there’s always room for more.”

 --Facebook post

We are a motley crew in the family of God. Yet our table fellowship can offer a glimpse to the world around us of God’s welcome and hospitality and grace.

In 2014, a group of concerned citizens in Chattanooga, TN, decided to bridge the gap between the two sides of their city. One side was known for its startup community. The other side was known for its homeless population. Between the two, large tables were set up, and 700 people sat down to share a meal together.

This idea took flight several years later as Gratefull: Nashville set up their tables. Sponsors donated food, decorations and utensils, yet were reluctant to stay and eat. Some neighbors were hesitant to believe the meal was truly free. Yet for those who did sit down to eat, as Ryan Dunn shares,

“We got to both love and be loved. Strangers cleaned plates for strangers. Everyone took a personal interest in someone new and not just in who they came out with. Fears regarding religious factions or political affiliations were left aside as participants searched for commonality.

…”With the metaphor of the table before us, Gratefull: Nashville became a living parable of God's will for humanity. It is a will that diverse people come together seeking each other's benefit and rejoicing in their commonality. It is a will that we not conform simply to one another's expectations, but that we allow ourselves to be transformed by love. It is a will that we sit together and enjoy something extravagant while we laugh and share.”

-Ryan Dunn 11-21-18 www.umc.org/en/content/gods-great-big-table, adapted

Living as the body of Christ in this world will not always be easy. There are times when we will be moved out of our comfort zones, called to expand God’s welcome and grace at our tables.

Yet as we do so, may we give thanks that God first claims and welcomes each and every one of us. Then, out of God’s love for us, may we help others to find their place at God’s table.

God, by your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes and we feast together as his heavenly banquet. Through our hospitality may we bring a glimpse of the heavenly feast into our community and into our world. Amen.