

MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH HOSPITALITY

Luke 14:16-24

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Can you imagine a party where there was an unending guest list? A banquet with absolutely no dress code?

Can you imagine a wedding reception where the parents of the newlyweds care not one bit about how many people have rsvp'ed? Instead they walk out to the street with huge placards that say, "Come on in and join us. There's still more room!"

That's the kind of party we read about in this parable. Jesus tells this story when he's eating at the home of the Pharisees. First let's stop right there and realize that Jesus was eating at the home of one of the Pharisees. We talk a lot about the disputes Jesus had with the Pharisees, and they indeed disagreed strongly about the way the law should be interpreted and lived. Yet they ate together. Because that's what it means to be in community. It doesn't mean we always agree. It means we break bread together, listen to each other's stories, and regard one another as human beings with value and dignity.

Jesus tells this story about what God is like. God is the one who says, "There's still more room."

How can it be, people asked then, that Jesus would eat with someone like Zaccheus, a tax collector, so obviously a sinful person?

How can it be, people wondered, that Jesus would eat with women, not just have them prepare a meal for him, but actually sit down and talk with them?

Why is it, the disciples said, that Jesus would be willing to take time away from talking to important people to hug and play with children?

What is he doing, everyone asked, talking to that woman by the well? That one with the terrible reputation? Doesn't he know that people judge you by the company you keep?

Jesus came to earth to show us what the hospitality of God is like. When God throws a party, there is always more room. Always.

Now we all know what it feels like to be excluded. It's a pain we first experience in childhood. In my era, it happened this way. You would bring invitations to your birthday party to school. Then you would hand them out to your friends, at recess or at lunchtime. The people who didn't get invitations would notice, of course. And sometimes the people who did receive invitations would make sure that it was obvious that they were invited, that they were special.

These days it might be that you see evidence of the party you missed on twitter or instagram or facebook. Smiling faces, everyone having fun, and you weren't invited.

Rejected? Dejected? You know what it's like. To not make the team. To be broken up with. We all know what it feels like to be excluded. Rejected. Dejected.

These days the process of looking for a job is an exercise in patience, perseverance, persistence. You apply, you interview, and you never hear back. You're left hanging. I hear this same story from person after person, whether they're applying for a part-time job or a first job or whether they're a highly experienced professional. It's so hard not to take it personally, not to feel completely defeated when you're not even

given the courtesy of being notified that you weren't the one chosen. Being ignored might be the worst kind of exclusion.

This story that Jesus tells shocks us. A host throws a party and invites his friends. Nothing unusual there. That's what we all do. But then, the day of the party, the excuses start coming. "Sorry, something's come up; I'm not going to be able to make it." One by one, all of the invited guests send in their regrets. And the host is getting angry. "Why are people so rude? They told me they were coming and now they're begging off. They're too busy. They don't want to come. They have other priorities. They're just plain inconsiderate." He is not going to let his food and all of his preparation go to waste. He sends his servants out into the streets. "See who you can rustle up." "Invite the poor, the homeless, the people who never get invited to parties. Invite everyone you can." The servant does what he's told. Then he says to his master, "I brought people in, but there's still more room." "Then invite more; fill the room!"

This story makes me uncomfortable. It's natural for us to think of the host of the party as someone who reminds us of God...but if that's the case, I certainly don't believe that God has an A-list - as if these certain people are invited into the realm of God's love first...and others are second, the B-list, only invited when everyone else turns their back on God. I don't want to think of God that way. It doesn't fit with what we know of the character of God, does it? So let's reject that way of understanding the parable.

But there's still another troubling aspect of this parable. There's a word of judgment at the end. The host is happy that his party is full of people, but he hasn't forgotten the people who've insulted him by sending in their excuses. "None of those who were invited will taste my dinner," he exclaims.

Again, if we see the host of the party as God, we bristle at God's attitude.

But let's remember that the parables are stories, intended to provoke, to wake us up, to get us thinking. They are not commandments, they are not descriptions of God; they are stories. And this particular story was told to the Pharisees, with whom Jesus was eating dinner. The Pharisees were particularly taken with themselves; they thought of themselves as better than others. They were the ones who followed the rules, who obeyed all the laws. They had a bit of a superiority complex. They argue among themselves as to who should sit closest to the host of the party; they're obsessed with status.

What if Jesus tells this story to shake up the Pharisees' image of who God is? To say to them, "We worship a God who always says, 'There's more room.'" We worship a God who always says, "Let's fill the banquet hall." This is not a God who checks ID's at the door, a God who cares about a dress code. This is a God who wants, more than anything, to have a rollicking party full of revelers enjoying the great banquet.

I can imagine, sitting at dinner with Jesus, surrounded by people who look like me, and who believe like me, and hearing Jesus tell this story. I can imagine how shocked I would feel. Because don't we think that the word "exclusive" means "better"? The better colleges are the ones that accept the smallest percentage of students. Exclusive restaurants keep out the riffraff by charging exorbitant prices. Exclusive means better, right?

Or does this parable turn that notion on its head? There is no exclusion in God's realm. It's all inclusion. Let's let in more and more people. There's always more room.

No one is rejected, no one is kept out. Oh, sometimes we keep ourselves out. And isn't that the point of that last harsh comment? The host says, "No one I originally invited will taste my banquet." Maybe that's not a word of judgment but just simply fact. If we make excuses as to why we can't be a part of God's realm, then we'll miss the party. God doesn't slam the door on anyone, but if we walk away, we're excluding ourselves.

Imagine a party where everyone is invited, even us. Even us with all of the mistakes we've made. Even us when God knows all about our selfishness, our greed, our hypocrisy.

On this World Communion Sunday, we imagine a table with people from around the world, eating all different kinds of breads, singing all different kinds of songs. Imagine the languages, the colors of the clothing. Even more dramatic and radical, imagine a table at which Republicans and Democrats eat together, listening respectfully to one another's stories. Imagine a party where all truly feel welcome: those who live with disabilities, those who live with mental illness, depression, dementia. The activist wearing the "Black Lives Matter" button sits next to the police officer. The person whose child was killed in Oregon on Thursday is seated at the table alongside the parent of the shooter, and a member of the NRA. They're talking together, they're listening to each other. This is radical inclusion. This is the realm of God, not a guest list we would ever come up with, but if we are to ever experience anything like heaven on earth, we will start by sitting together, listening to one another's stories, and eating together the food that God provides.