

WHOSE TABLE?

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Reading: Luke 14:16–24

Jesus told this story: “A certain person was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet an attendant was sent to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ This was reported to the banquet-giver who became angry and said, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the hurt, the blind and the scared.’ The attendant said ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ ‘Then go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full’ said the banquet-giver.”

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“I was invited in.”

That phrase is central to so many of our most meaningful, hopeful and lifesaving stories.

“I had nowhere to go and I was invited in.” “I was lost and was invited in.” “I felt alone and was invited in.” “I felt like a stranger and I was invited in.”

When have you been invited in? What are your stories about the times you’ve been invited? Your experiences need not feel extraordinary to be important and lifegiving . . . maybe even lifesaving? In fact, sometimes the mundane nature of these invitations is what makes them so exceptional.

I was invited in to a Thanksgiving dinner by Andy Quiroga when I was newly arrived at grad school in Florida and would have otherwise spent the holiday alone. I was invited in to a small shop in Bangalore, India, when the monsoon rains stopped our rickshaw and the water (and sewage?) was knee-high. I was invited in to sit on the shoulders of a huge, scary-looking biker guy when I got separated from my dad and godfather in the crowd of a Cleveland baseball game when I was 8. I was invited in to eat meals with my good friend Pallav’s Indian family when I was at an age that I needed to have my narrow understandings of the world lovingly widened. I was invited in to conversations with a dying man who shared with me his life. I could go on and on. So could we all.

When have you been invited in? Share those stories with each other today and this week. Name these moments in your life and give them the gratitude they deserve.

This parable we are hearing today centers on the idea of invitation and being invited in. The story describes an invitation to a banquet. Some of those initially invited find excuses to not attend. Then the invitation gets widened to include those who are often not invited to such banquets. The invitation became wide and the parable gives its lesson: The banquet is available to all.

In this season of rallying and renewing, we are talking about how we gather together, who is here with us and why it can be different here. Two weeks ago DeWayne began on Rally Sunday reminding us that we are sufficient and we already have enough; come with what you can give. He said, “We bring what we have and let God use it.” Last week, Cynthia brought us into the loving embrace of the mother hen’s wings, of a God “who so longs for us” we are allowed to be taken in, loved, and cared for. This fall we are reconnecting, returning, renewing, restoring—so many *re-* words!—and we get to remember that we have enough and we are abundantly loved just as we are. What gifts to be reminded of!

And you are all here because at some point you were invited in to this place. In some way—maybe you no longer remember exactly how—you were invited in. Some person, situation, idea, desire or hope provided an invitation to you and you have accepted it and we hope you continue to accept it. And because I have a microphone and most of you are looking at me, I have the honor of making this invitation explicit. Wherever you have been, wherever you are going, whoever you are right now, you are invited here. Whether this is your first time or the 5000th time, you are invited to be a part of this community, of this banquet, and to be fed.

Sometimes its hard to accept invitations, isn’t it? It is so much easier to stay put sometimes, to hold firm to our habits, to read a book or watch TV or sleep a bit extra or do that one last work task. It can be so much easier to want to accept the invitation than it is to actually show up. I may *want* to do something more than I will actually put in the effort to do it.

These excuses are not a modern phenomenon. We see in this parable that our spiritual ancestors also struggled with this. “I wanted to come to the banquet, but I need to see my new purchase of land.” “I really did want to show up but I have these new oxen and they don’t like to be left alone. They aren’t really housebroken yet.” “I really did want to accept that invitation but I just got married and you know . . .” It is so easy to find reasons to not accept invitations, and it’s also important to remember those moments that you have experienced because you accepted the invitation.

Not only are we invited to this banquet, but we are also called to do the inviting. We are called to bring in the poor, the hurt, the blind, and the scared. We are called to extend the invitation to those who may not know they are invited. Not only do we get to look around at who is here, we have to ask who isn’t here and why. Who are the others who need to know they are invited and welcomed and loved? They do not need to be “perfect” or “right” or “one of us” (whatever those things mean) to be invited, for the invitation is for all, no matter where they’ve been, where they are going, or who they are. The naming of the poor, the hurt, the blind, and the scared is both literal and a stand-in. We literally need to invite the poor, the hurt, the blind, and the scared. But is also a stand-in to mean everyone. For if we invite the poor, the hurt, the blind, and the scared, then we have the societal margins invited, too.

But what are we inviting people to? What does this banquet refer to? Is this guy up here saying that this parable refers to Plymouth Church in Minneapolis? Am I supposed to go out and find people to bring here?

Of course! And not at all.

A meal or banquet is common language for the hoped-for community of God, the place where all can come and be fed and be fed equally. A banquet is always rooted in abundance, in having enough for all who arrive, no matter what we eat or how hungry we are. This is what we are being invited into: the hoped-for community that follows God’s calling to love God, to love ourselves, and to love the others. This banquet is abundant!

The invitation of God’s banquet isn’t just here in this space at Plymouth. The invitation can be found practically anywhere. It is an ethic, a way of living and treating yourself, others, and the world around you. You do not need to be in this space to accept God’s invitation. We would never be so presumptuous to

think that this one place owns God's invitation . . . or even that any conception of faith owns the definition of the God who is inviting us. *And* this place—Plymouth Church specifically—is one place where the banquet is available to you. We are working to be one particular place that helps make meaning out of the universal. We are working to be one place in which the invitation to the banquet of God's abundant love can be felt and shared.

We are all invited to the table. And we are called to invite more. The invitation is big and wide and abundant. The invitation is love.

This can still seem daunting, I think. What if we invite people and they make excuses and don't show up? What if we invite others and they don't like it? So, I wonder, does it help to remember that this is not our table? Whose table is it? It is God's table, not ours. This banquet is not given by me or by clergy or a board or you. We are all invited by God to the banquet of God's abundant love. This is just one place where we can give and receive the invitation. We are all strangers and family. None of us own love, but we do carry the responsibility of sharing it and offering welcome, of living it, of inviting others into loving relationship and courageous space, because we are at God's banquet table.

When have you been invited in? What goodness have you received from the invitations of your life? Each of those moments were instances of the abundant banquet of God.

How can you spread the invitation and create those lifegiving moments for others, helping them feel seen and heard and invited for being the beloved person they are? How can you create new instances of the abundant banquet of God? What invitations can you extend?

And how can we do this together here? How can we gather in loving community while continuing to make sure the invitation is sent outside these walls? How can we make a habit of not forgetting about the poor, the hurt, the blind, and the scared, spreading the banquet's abundant invitation to absolutely everyone?

We do it by continually offering the invitation, and by accepting the invitations when they come to us, by showing up with and for others in loving community, by remembering whose banquet it is.

It is God's banquet table and it is abundant and we get to be the hands, feet, and voices that help make the table bigger. May we continually make it so.