

Luke 14:15-24 (NIV) **The Parable of the Great Banquet**

15 When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

16 Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. 17 At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

18 "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.'

19 "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

20 "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

21 "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

22 "'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'

23 "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. 24 I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

"Invitation to the Table"

I know that many in this congregation are familiar with the term "Radical Hospitality." Many churches studied Radical Hospitality about a decade ago, as part of Bishop Robert Schnase's "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations." Bishop Schnase begins his chapter-long description of Radical Hospitality with this foundational definition:

Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.

It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. Beyond intention, hospitality practices the gracious love of Christ, respects the dignity of others,

*and expresses **God's invitation** to others, not our own.*

Our scripture reading this morning, also known as the Parable of the Great Banquet," is probably one of the best illustrations of **radical hospitality** we have in our tradition. (I emphasize **radical** because we have yet to add that to our definition.) But getting back to the scripture, this story about a dinner invitation comes on the heels of a passage we read in worship a couple of weeks ago, where Jesus was invited to a schwancky dinner at the home of a Pharisee. After Jesus watched the guests jockeying for a place of honor on the seating chart, he told a parable about a wedding banquet at which it was more blessed for guests to choose a humble place and then be invited to move up higher, rather than to choose a place of honor and be embarrassed by a request to relinquish one's seat to a more important guest.

Then Jesus went on to propose a counter-cultural plan, where, when hosting a banquet, one should not invite guests who can do favors for the host, or raise the social status of the host. Eternal reward belongs to those who invite folks on the fringes of society, who have no means of repayment. Those who are poor, disabled, and those for whom existence is a challenge, will be blessed by this act of kindness.

One of the listeners replied to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." But I get the impression that Jesus felt he needed to repeat his point with another parable, because he wanted to make sure the listeners understood. And so, Jesus launches into today's parable. Now he describes a great banquet to which some blessed and privileged folks have been invited. The original invitation list included one with enough money to buy land, another who is able to acquire 5 yoke of oxen (signifying significant wealth), and another with a dowry. All of these privileged ones rejected the invitation of the banquet host. But the banquet hall and the feast had been prepared, and all of that should not go to waste. So the host turns away from the privileged and invites instead those who will benefit the most from gracious, radical hospitality: the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

This hospitality is offered freely and humbly without any need for reciprocity. Rather than viewing any person in terms of how they benefit us, radical hospitality means accepting the person with no thought to personal gain. For the church, that means instead of seeking out people who will support the congregation, we are called instead to seek out those who need our support. To offer radical hospitality is to intentionally

welcome the marginalized, the forgotten, and the misunderstood among us. Bishop Schase reminds us that "Jesus' hospitality extends beyond the cordial welcome we offer when someone appears at the threshold of the church and then feel good that we've completed our obligations." Jesus' emphasis includes assuming an unceasingly invitational posture, especially among those outside the community of faith.

The Broad St. UMC in Norwich, NY was located in the center of what was at the turn of this century, the smallest city in New York State, and the county seat for Chenango County. They hosted a free meal **every** week during the school year, averaging 150 persons each week. During holiday meals, the attendance usually swelled to nearly 400. I had two jobs at those weekly meals. I was in charge of washing pots and pans in the kitchen, earning me the title of "Chief Clanger and Banger!" My other job was to greet folks when the meal was ready, give the menu for the evening, and offer a pastoral prayer. So, my usual speech went something like this: *"Good Evening, and welcome to dinner at Broad St. United Methodist Church. For your dining pleasure this evening, our menu features relish trays which are already on your tables, Cream of Broccoli soup, and delectable grilled ham & cheese sandwiches. Soup, sandwiches, and beverages will be brought to you at your seats. And then you may select a desert to top off your meal."* Then, I would ask for joys and concerns before offering a prayer of intercession and blessing for the meal. After a couple of months on the job, I realized that no one was inviting these folks to become part of the other ministries of the church. So, I started to include, following the prayer, *"You are welcome to join us for worship on Sundays at 8:30 and 11:00 a.m., and to participate in any of the ministries found on our church calendar."*

Well, lo and behold, some folks began attending worship, including a young mom with five children, all needing to be baptized. They usually needed a ride, and would ask anyone providing transportation to stop at the grocery store on the way home, too. That was not an easy task with such a large family. And another couple, both traversing the streets in motorized wheelchairs began to attend. But the wheelchairs would get stuck on the snowy and slushy sidewalks in the winter, and they would need a push or a tow. And the number of folks from the dinners attending other events began to grow.

Like most other churches, this one occasionally experienced some financial strain. An usher, who also served on the Finance Team, and

helped to cook for the dinners, said to me, "But you are inviting too many people to church who can't put a thing in the offering plate!" When those words came out of his mouth, they echoed in the room as if we were in the very judgment hall of Christ. He gasped as he realized what he had said, and followed that with, "Oh dear! I think it must be my turn to take Denise and her kids home this week."

We all utter words we wish we could take back. That growing Christian that day realized that radical hospitality demands that those of us who have more, those of us in positions of power and privilege, must be willing to divest ourselves of at least some of that wealth, power, and privilege if we are going to truly love as Christ has loved us, break down the walls that divide humanity, and sit down at table together with any kind of equality among us.

Now, I am going to challenge our understanding of the word "hospitality" a bit more. "Hospitality" comes from the Latin "hospes," which is built upon the word "hostis," originally meaning stranger, or more explicitly, a hostile stranger or enemy. This suggests that there is something about being hospitable that includes taking risks. It's not just about having your friends over for dinner. Jesus was renowned for taking all kinds of risks when it came to welcoming the "other." Jesus touched lepers, engaged in conversation with unclean women, and healed on the Sabbath. Jesus' table was so open that Judas was knowingly welcomed to Jesus' final meal. Jesus extended hospitality to the one who would betray him by handing him over to the authorities.

Yet, we hear weekly on the news about neighborhoods that oppose the establishment of a nursing home, a half-way house, a domestic violence safe house, a center for refugee resettlement, or a homeless shelter in their area. There are many who worry that welcoming the residents of these facilities into their community will create too high a risk to everyone's safety. *And so those with power and privilege effectively shelter their community from the opportunity to express radical hospitality.* Bishop Schnase states that "radical" means "drastically different from ordinary practice," ... "and so it provokes practices that exceed expectations, that go the second mile, that take welcoming the stranger to the max." When congregations practice radical hospitality, they invite and welcome more people, and younger people, and more diverse people, and then surprise newcomers with a glimpse of the unmerited gracious love of God that they see in Christ.

A Place at the Table ~ "Invitation to the Table"

October 13, 2019

Rev. Beckie Sweet

Today we consider, to whom will I give an invitation to come to the table of Kenmore United Methodist Church? Is the table reserved only for those who will support the church? Or will the church take the risk and make the commitment to support those in need of a warm welcome in our community and world? The power of an invitation to change a person's life must never be under-estimated!

Today, we are reminded that no matter how old or how young we are, whatever our marital status, sexual orientation or gender identity is, whatever our ethnic or cultural heritage is, how rich or how poor we are, how healthy or unhealthy, we all want and need to be welcomed. AND there are those in our neighborhood and in our midst who **need** that invitation and welcome, and those for whom we may need to give up some of our power and privilege and wealth in order to make a place at the table for them. Who are the ones who need us to risk taking a chance on them, so that they might know that they are LOVED? Are we at the point of saying, "We invite you to come as you are, bringing all your thoughts, emotions, doubts, and beliefs,... and experience the love of Christ with us."

There is the good news of the Christian faith: Radical Hospitality is faith in action! Christ's love is active through us! Amen.