

A LIVING INVITATION

9/1/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 17 (Year C): Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Since I've been back from sabbatical this past month, I've had more than one person slide up alongside me after worship, on any given Sunday, to say: "Wow! Those readings really speak to what's going on in our country, don't they?" Of course, that always puts me in a bit of a predicament. It's clear that the person is referring to politics, but how do I know which way their politics lean? How do I not alienate anyone, while still holding fast to Jesus's message (which is actually quite political no matter how you look at it)?

This morning's Gospel got me to thinking about that even more; what if it was me throwing this big party? Who would I invite? Would I hope people leave their political affiliations at the door? Would I only invite people who share my political views?

It's not often I throw an elaborate dinner party and have to consider these kinds of details. But in the months before my 50th birthday, my best friend, Tamie, helped me brainstorm about what I wanted my party to look and feel like. I wanted to create a wonderful memory that would last for years, so I planned out all kinds of details including the mix of people based on the balance of men to women, and singles to couples, as well as the ability to engage in interesting conversation.

I was already imagining the great dialogue we'd have over dinner, and I wanted to be sure we could all hear each other. I wanted it to have a restaurant-like atmosphere, but I didn't want the party to be in a restaurant. To bring my vision to life, Tamie transformed her living room into a candle-lit banquet hall for the evening.

We brought in food from a nearby Turkish restaurant, had jazz music playing softly in the background, opened some nice wine, and welcomed 11 of my closest friends. It was the perfect party, and I will always cherish that memory.

What would your ideal party look like? Who would you invite? What kind of food would you want to serve? What kind of music would you play? Your ideal party might be completely different than mine, but even so, imagine how much more the party planning would change if you accepted the advice Jesus offers in Luke!

He tells the host of the party he's attending, for future reference, to "Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Jesus clarifies this, stipulating, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors," rather invite the outcasts...those living at the edges of society...the people who might not otherwise get invited.

I don't know about you, but I can honestly say that, even though I might want an interesting mix of people at a party, it would never occur to me to invite strangers; not just strangers, but strangers who seem so different from me...whether literally poor, crippled, lame and blind, or metaphorically.

But before we all panic, it's helpful to realize Jesus wasn't actually talking about a dinner party, but about the "Messianic banquet" to which we are all invited. Jesus tells this parable and offers the advice about who to invite as a way to describe the heavenly banquet we continually prepare for here.

Each week when we gather around this table—this altar—we remind ourselves, and each other, that Jesus has prepared the way so that we can help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

I've identified four important things to remember about this passage...the first is that we need to understand the party Jesus refers to is the banquet we're called to around this table, which represents the much bigger celebration of all the world being re-deemed, or re-connected, to God!

The second thing is that the invitation list for this party is ever-changing, always growing, and largely our responsibility to make sure everyone receives their invitation. We don't talk about all of us being invited, because we're already here; we get it; we've accepted our invitation. But there are so many others out there who don't yet realize, they are invited, too.

So, we're not talking about literally walking around downtown Encinitas and inviting strangers to our private dinner parties—although there'd be nothing wrong with that. Instead, what Jesus is getting at is that we continue to help host events, like Showers of Blessings and the Food Pantry, so that even people living in their cars or on the streets—those at the edges of society—realize they, too, are welcome at the Messianic banquet.

To parties one of us might host, we would probably invite people who could reciprocate by inviting us to a party of their own one day. But Jesus says, "Invite the ones who can't repay you." He says this because inviting others to the heavenly banquet is not about us gaining something.

So, we don't just invite those who will be a good fit for our parish, or who like the same kind of music as we do, or understand the way we do liturgy, rather we look for who doesn't yet know about God, and invite them.

Additionally, there are other ways people are living on edges of society. They might not be living in their car, but we're all surrounded by people in our daily lives—at work, at school, on volunteer boards—who are struggling with financial challenges, trying to make sense of their child's addiction, or worrying about elderly parents. Those folks are not literally living on the edge of society, but often feel isolated and have the sense that they have to bear their burdens alone.

Those people also need inviting. Perhaps, it's helpful, here, to lay this morning's Epistle reading alongside the Gospel. The passage from Hebrews sounds a lot like the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who often gave advice to early Christian communities. In this passage, the author instructs the people to "Let mutual love continue; Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers" ...simply translated: "Treat others the way you want to be treated."

Then, there's some language that might seem awkward...maybe even embarrassing to us. Hebrews directs the community to honor the commitments they've made. If you're married, for example, the author explains you should be loyal to your spouse. And all of that is to demonstrate that Christians are people of integrity—not rules, but integrity.

So here's the third point—and this is something that continues to become clearer to me as my own faith matures—the third point is that we are not told to behave certain ways so that we, personally, are assured a place in heaven. Rather, we are given instruction about righteous living so that we serve as a living invitation to others.

Think about it: if you are living a life of integrity, keeping your word and your commitments, loving others, and finding joy in God's amazing creation, people around you will wonder how you came to be that way. Watching how your life works—that you have the same challenges as they do, yet you somehow seem to be filled with peace of mind in the midst of your struggles—they'll want to know if they can have that for themselves. The example of our lives becomes a living invitation to God's banquet table.

The fourth take-away is that this is not a party we have to plan. Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, God has already created the lasting memory—we just have to help ensure the invitations get distributed! All are welcome, and no invitee is more important than another.

We demonstrate that by coming up to receive communion simply by the row we're sitting in, not by a pre-determined order, based on who has more money or greater status; and we don't choose who we're going to stand or kneel next to, we just come up and receive alongside whichever sibling in Christ is there.

So, what might you do this coming week to serve as a “living invitation” to those at the edges of your world? You might take a literal invitation with you in the form of the invitation cards (which have a beautiful image of our parish-life on one side, and a list of our worship times on the other). They're out there in the Narthex; take a couple and find someone to give them to this week.

And/or you might consider this quote. It's typically attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Translated from Greek, gospel means the “good news”, and the good news is that ALL are welcomed at the party God has prepared, so “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary” as you become a living invitation to the Messianic banquet.

-AMEN

The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

They did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, "Where is the LORD?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing.

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

- 1 Sing with joy to God our strength *
and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob.
- 10 I am the LORD your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt and said, *
"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."
- 11 And yet my people did not hear my voice, *
and Israel would not obey me.
- 12 So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their hearts, *
to follow their own devices.
- 13 Oh, that my people would listen to me! *
that Israel would walk in my ways!
- 14 I should soon subdue their enemies *
and turn my hand against their foes.
- 15 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, *
and their punishment would last for ever.
- 16 But Israel would I feed with the finest wheat *
and satisfy him with honey from the rock.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."