

Sunday, July 21, 2019

The First Reading is Isaiah 25:1-10a:

¹ O LORD, you are my God;

I will exalt you, I will praise your name;
for you have done wonderful things,
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

² For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;
the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.

³ Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

⁴ *For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.*

When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,

⁵ the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.

⁶ *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*

⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

¹⁰ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.

The Second Reading is Luke 14:15-24

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ ¹⁹ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ ²⁰ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ ²² And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ ²³ Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

The Message is Entitled, What Kind of Feast?

A wonderful feast had been prepared. That certainly was my first experience of a midnight buffet on a cruise ship! The spread was amazing and there were more choices than one could ever imagine. As a child I remember my summer trips to Michigan to visit extended family, when everyone gathered together for a huge summer outdoor feast. The tables of food seemed endless and everyone, young and old, was included. Of course, when we hear the word feast here in America, many of us might imagine our extended family gatherings at Thanksgiving. When dish after dish spreads across the table accompanying the beautifully roasted turkey. When was the last time you were invited to a feast?

Jesus had been invited to a feast at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. Of course, Jesus was not your usual dinner guest. He was never able to stop himself from seizing teaching moments, even if it might ruffle the feathers of those who invited him. On his way to the Pharisee’s home he drew attention to himself, for it was the Sabbath and in route he encountered a man with severe edema. As others approached to enter the home of the Pharisee Jesus asked them, “It is lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?” Those arriving didn’t know what to say, so Jesus went ahead and healed the man. I can only imagine their thoughts, “This is going to be an interesting dinner party!”

Jesus the ultimate observer watched as the guests took their seats, for he noticed that the early arrivers took seats of honor. Well, Jesus couldn't help himself and he launched into a parable with punch, "Don't take the seat of honor, take the lowest place... And by the way, when you give a banquet, don't invite your friends. No invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, that is, those who cannot repay you. Do this and you will be blessed. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

It is after this teachable moment that we entered the text today because one of the dinner guests is moved to say in response to Jesus's words, "Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God."

"Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God." Don't you wonder what moved this guest to speak up? Was he trying to impress Jesus, by agreeing with him? Was he excusing himself from the challenge of Jesus' words? We don't really know the motivation of this guest's comment, but we do know that Jesus immediately launched into yet another parable.

You'll note that in this parable, once the invited guests decide they had too much on their plates to attend, the guest list of this parable is the same as the previous parable. "Bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame," and when that didn't fill up all the seats at the host's banqueting table, the owner of the house said, "Go out to the roads and the lanes, and compel people to come in."

The message that Jesus shared at the home of a leader of the Pharisees, the one we read today as well as the one that preceded our text, is this: the invitation to God's table is all-inclusive. Through these parables, Jesus reminds us rather pointedly that the excluded are included at God's table. There is certainly a lesson we should take to heart at this particular juncture in history.

"This radical welcome came home one day when a church was celebrating Communion," wrote Biblical Commentator Penny Nixon. She continued writing, "The table was set. The elements had been consecrated. The servers were in place and people began to receive Communion. The invitation had emphasized that all were welcome, regardless of church membership, faith or belief. As people were coming forward, the pastor looked up just at the moment when a visitor grabbed the bread of consecration off the Communion table and began to eat it. The pastor reached him before the ushers did and gently accompanied the guest out into the foyer. It was only then the pastor realized the guest had no shoes or socks. His coat offered little protection against the cold of the season. He

had taken the bread because he was hungry. 'Blessed is anyone radically welcomed who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.'"

Sara Miles, who was raised atheist, and self-described as a lesbian left-wing journalist who'd covered wars and revolutions around the world wrote, "I didn't even know what Episcopal meant... [Yet,] I walked into the sanctuary,] took a chair, and tried not to catch anyone's eye. We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. 'Jesus invites everyone to his table,' the lady announced, and we started moving up in a stately dance to the table in the rotunda. It had some dishes on it, and a pottery goblet. And then we gather around the table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying 'the body of Christ,' and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying 'the blood of Christ,' and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me." She wandered into a church, received communion, and found herself transformed-embracing a faith she'd once scorned. "Blessed is anyone radically welcomed who will eat bread in the kingdom of God."

The unsheltered man and a journalist who didn't know what Episcopal meant wandered into church sanctuaries and experienced the all-inclusive invitation of God's table. The feast God offers through the church is to be open, for the kingdom of God is accessible and welcoming to all.

Is this the feast that we set before others as a church and with our very lives?

At the Presbyterian Women's conference yesterday, Kristi Van Nostran shared at her seminar, "I didn't have much space in my one-bedroom apartment, I didn't have any extra resources given my part-time job and full-time seminary work, I didn't have much of anything to offer and yet I welcomed a young woman into my one-bedroom apartment, for she was an asylum seeker with an emergency need. I said yes to the emergency need, with the caveat for 30 days only." She paused and then said with a beaming smile, "That was last November and well, it is July and Marisol is my roommate today." Kristi had plenty of excuses as to why her "table" was full, yet something stirred within her and she welcomed Marisol. Kristi went on to chronicle the generous feast God has for both her and Marisol since November of last year.

What kind of feast are we offering to others by the way we live our daily lives? What kind of feast are we offering to others by the way we are the church?

Commentator Raymond Picket reminds us that, “The parable of the Great Banquet... calls us to embody God’s hospitality not just to insiders but also to outsiders, to those who have been socially marginalized... or as Eugene Peterson translates, “Collect all who look like they are in need.”

Where do you place yourself in this parable? Are you one of the originally invited guests who is filled with excuses as to why you can’t make the dinner date? Are you one who comes when the invitation is widely offered to outsiders? Are you one that needs to be compelled to come to the table? Did you see yourself as the host?

Or maybe you are part of the dinner party that Jesus attended when this parable was shared. Are you the guest who proclaims, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread at the kingdom of God? Or are you one of the dinner quests we don’t hear from? One that might be angered or challenged or even bewildered by Jesus’s parable?

There are so many angles of entry into this passage as well as ways to take this passage to heart, yet commentators agree that the parable of the Great Banquet table links the future messianic banquet (the heavenly multitude) with the call to embody God’s hospitality now. Not tomorrow or next week or next year, but now. And not just to insiders but also to outsiders, especially to those who may be socially marginalized in our time and place.

God’s feast, the one we proclaim to partake of as we gather to worship each Sunday, is offered to *all peoples*, not just for some people. As Isaiah reminds us, “The Lord of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.”

We know the call. Yet, I’ll be the first one to admit, that it is all too easy to slip into a comfortable rhythm of including only those who are already in our midst. It is so much easier to be hospitable to those who are already among us, rather than constantly inviting others to our table. It is also much easier to be hospitable to those who like what we like and act as we act.

Some churches may have thrown the hungry man back out into the cold. Some churches may have barred Sara from receiving communion, because she wasn’t baptized or hadn’t made a confession of faith. Kristi could have easily said, “No, not at this time,” given her very reasonable conclusions about her lack of space and resources.

Yet, we are called to embody God’s hospitality, not ours. We are called, as a church and as individuals, to embody hospitality that radically welcomes all peoples, not just some people. As we go into this week, may this question stir

within us and compel us to act, “Is this the feast, God’s radically inclusive welcome, that we set before others as a church and with our very lives?” I pray so. Amen.