

There Is Still Room
Luke 14:15-23
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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In the 1990 movie “Pretty Woman,” Julia Roberts plays Vivian, a prostitute who is hired by Edward, a wealthy businessman. The movie is centered on the limited time they have together while he is in Los Angeles for business. Contrary to what you might assume based on her job title, Vivian, ends up spending much time at events as Edward’s “plus one”. Over the course of their days together she attends a polo match, the opera, and meals including a business lunch and nice dinners. And yet her life has not prepared her for such occasions. Enter Barney, the manager at the hotel where they are staying. Because he understands that paying attention to his clientele is part of his job, he notices that she is likely to be anything but comfortable accompanying Edward to meetings with clients and fancy occasions. And so, he takes it upon himself to teach her which fork is used for what and other expected table manners. He also lines her up with a personal shopper and stylist. By the time her training and preparation are done, she seems like she belongs at the tables where she finds herself. And yet, it is clear that both within herself as well as in the mind of at least one other character, the question remains – who is welcome at the table?

See, so often we only find ourselves at tables with others like us. This is true whether it is the lunch room tables in school cafeterias, the family tables, the tables over a work day lunch hour, and too often even the communion table. And yet time and time again we see Jesus share a table with those who are different from him, with those considered outsiders and unclean, with those with whom we might never even mix.

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To fully understand today's reading, it is important to note the context. If we had read back to the beginning of chapter 14 we would have had the scene set. Jesus and others were entering the home of a Pharisee, one of the Jewish leaders, for a sabbath meal. The earlier verses in chapter 14 show Jesus healing on the sabbath. He then makes an observation about how people were choosing their seats, and encourages them that it is always better to choose a lower place – one of less honor – and to be invited to move to a more honorable seat rather than having the host ask you to leave a table because someone more important belongs there. Next Jesus turns to the host and encourages him to not only invite those who are like him and those who can invite him to their homes on the next sabbath, but to invite those who cannot repay. It is in this setting and following these conversations that today's parable is shared.

And so, in this context we hear Jesus say, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' 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.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 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.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' 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.'"¹

¹ Luke 14:16b-23, NRSV.

So, while the conversation first focused on the meals that the people around the table might be attending or hosting. Here in the parable, the focus shifted to the meals or relationships into which they were invited.

Because remember, the people Jesus was dining with that day were the established religious people, the established religious leaders. They were the ones who thought they largely had it figured out. They were the ones who were concerned with doing things right and making sure others were following all the rules. And if we are honest, we are sometimes like them.

We are, too often, the ones who think we have it figured out. We are, too often, the ones who don't worry about whether our place at the table is secure. We are, too often, the ones who assume we are following the right rules and who, whether we like to admit it or not, too often are policing how others are or are not following those rules.

We good, religious people, even those of us who claim again and again that everyone is welcome at the table, sometimes don't realize when we are leaving folks out. And we sometimes don't realize when we ourselves are opting out.

It seems there are a couple of important messages in today's parable.

First, we hear that when the servant went to remind those who had been invited that it was time for the banquet, they all had better things to do. Those people were the insiders – they were us. And, if we understand this parable to be about participating in the realm of God, then they were those who understood themselves to be faithful to God and yet whose priorities reflected something different.

So, this parable causes us to ask ourselves – in what ways are we invited to participate in God's realm but opt out by choosing other priorities? In what ways do we get so consumed with ourselves, with our schedules, with our busyness, with our accumulation, that we ignore the call

of God? And this is about more than not being in worship because another commitment took us away on Sunday morning. This is about the ways in which we show up for God and for others moment after moment, every day of the week.

In this parable the ones who were first invited don't end up eating the meal. But, let's be clear, this isn't punishment...rather this is the simple reality. And it is the reality because they opted out, because they chose other priorities rather than showing up for God's feast.

And that is an important conversation for us to have. It is important for us to learn to be honest about the ways that we choose ourselves over the other, the ways we choose the priorities of this world over the priorities of God. And this is hard conversation for which there are not many safe spaces. So, church, we are invited to engage the conversation, not in order to accuse one another, but in order to support each other as we strive daily to live in the ways of Jesus, to live from the heart of God.

And then there is a second thing here that we cannot miss – especially on this World Communion Sunday. When the ones who were initially invited didn't show up, that caused the host, rather than to cancel the party, to just create another guest list. And suddenly in that moment, people who had otherwise been kept from the table were now the honored guests. Luke tells us that among those invited were “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” and beyond that anyone and everyone who wanted to come was invited.

And, while the lack of original guests seems to have prompted the host's additional invitations, the reality is that those who were first invited didn't have to not show up in order for there to be room at the table for the others. If we do a quick reading of this text we might think it is an either-or proposition. But, if we pay attention we see something else. Look, there in verse 22 – there are four little words that we rarely pay attention to. After the host asks the servant to

invite others, the servant replies that it has been done and says, “there is still room.” The table of God is abundantly large. There is always more room at God’s table.

So, the good news is that whether you have opted out a hundred times before or whether you have only now heard the invitation you are welcome and there will always be room. And even more than that, our God wants the table full.

On this World Communion Sunday we celebrate that across differences that have divided us in many ways and that likely will continue to do so, we can pause with the reality that there is room at God’s table for everyone.

So, today as we worship we remember that God’s children from Bangladesh to Brazil, from Nigeria to New Zealand, from Germany to Canada, and everywhere else are all welcome. Today as we worship we remember that God’s children who are hold fast to the traditions of old and those who love to shake things up with new ideas, those who have a more conservative understanding and those who are more progressive, they are all welcome. Today as we worship we remember that God’s children who are straight and those who identify as LGBTQ, those who are single and those who are partnered, those who are old and those who are young, those who are typically abled and those who are differently abled...all are welcome.

Today we celebrate that at God’s table there is always room. The invitation is always open and we are encouraged to keep issuing it to others. We have been invited, but it’s not just a table for those like us. Rather we are instructed to keep on giving the invitation – to those like us and to those who are very different, to keep on giving the invitation to everyone, because the love of God is for all...and at God’s table there is still room.

Amen.