Supper With Jesus

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

August 28, 2022 ~ Luke 14:1, 7-14

To begin with a moment of personal privilege: I just recently returned from a three month sabbatical.

In my absence, I am grateful for the leadership and care provided by Amy, the entire staff, the wardens and vestry.

The sabbatical was wonderful! I feel rested, refreshed, rejuvenated. My heart is full. The highlights? Six days on the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, evensong in Durham Cathedral, long walks o’er the Yorkshire dales, lots of writing, and the birth of a second grandchild. I am eager to share more stories, and I will. And I am eager to hear your stories: what you’ve been up to, and what God’s been up to in your life.

But for now, let’s attend to what God may be saying to us today.

Let us pray. Christ, our savior, open our hearts and minds this day. Teach us what you alone know we each need to hear. Turn our hearts, shape our lives, that we may live your love. Amen.

I needed to start with a prayer – well, because I always need to center myself anew in God’s presence – and because after hearing today’s Gospel, I’d think twice before inviting Jesus to come have supper at my house. He might spoil the party.

A Pharisee invited Jesus and, given that Pharisees were religious and civic leaders, we can picture a fairly swell crowd – intellectuals, dignitaries, the upper echelon. Guests arrived, gathered on the terrace, greeted one another, chatted amiably. A steward offered a glass of wine, a canapé. But as they moved into the dining room, Jesus, a visiting rabbi of some renown, challenged the seating arrangement, pointed a finger and called out those who were jostling to sit near the host or near choice guests. He said it was a story about guests at a wedding, but they knew he was speaking to them.

Ouch! Not just awkward, downright rude. In the silence, guests stopped midway to their envied seat. Jesus continued, “and look who’s here, all the local hotshots – who’ve no doubt been invited because of what they each can give in return – connections, referrals, prestige, glitter. You really ought to have invited those who’ve never had a feast like this, the guy outside on the sidewalk, the one just paroled from prison, or the mom and her kids in the family shelter; the hungry, the destitute.”

If I’d been a guest that night, I imagine I’d have gone home with a hot swirl of feelings – hurt, indignant, upset, fueled with a pinch of shame. “I care for the poor. But here? Now? Questioning who invites whom to their own dinner party?!” I don’t like being called out. It’s hard to have my inclinations and biases revealed, especially when my motives are indeed a bit self-serving... even if I hadn’t really been conscious of my selfishness.

But as I sat with Jesus’ words, I might realize that he wasn’t asking me to do something heroic or costly or be a saint or something. All he really asked is that I mix it up a little when I invite people for supper, that I sit down and break bread with folks who aren’t from my side of the tracks, with those who have little to eat. He didn’t say, do it every night; just give it a try.

Jesus’ teaching here is disarmingly straightforward. It’s physical. The life and love we’re called to embody takes place in and through our bodies. If we act different, the world will look different. Cross boundaries, move from our own places of comfort, safe distance, or societal expectation, to places of proximity, closeness, relationship. For decades Father Gregory Boyle has worked with gang members in LA. He concludes, “The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.”

Supper was important to Jesus. He talked about it a lot. From Jesus’ perspective, when we share a meal with people, it gives us a pretty good look at the life God intends for us. For Jesus, supper is a foretaste of what is to come, a foretaste of the fellowship God intends, the beloved community.

I invite you to take a moment now and call to mind some of the supper tables you’ve shared during the course of your life. The table at your grandparents’ house with family; at a school cafeteria – laughing easily with friends or awkward with the treachery of school dynamics; around a camp fire with sounds and smells of the wild; as a guest in a foreign country with foreign food and foreign language; at a conference center with colleagues from work; with our neighbors here sharing lunch in the Water Ministry; in your own kitchen last night; around the different altars where you’ve been fed with bread and wine, body and blood.

When it’s up to you, who do you invite into your life? Who do you make time for, to be with and to get to know? And to what end? The tables we share and the company we keep when we gather for a meal shapes the values we embrace and the values we live out in our lives.

I am preaching to myself. I struggle with the fact that it is easy for me to do my job and hardly ever have to leave the bucolic insularity of this neighborhood.

“Whoever you are, wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome at Christ’s table.” I’ve served with six different churches. In each one, this teaching was at the heart. In one, we hosted a shelter and ate supper each winter night with those who were homeless. In another we invited our neighbors and cooked breakfast together on Saturday mornings. In another we offered groceries and fresh produce; hundreds came; we thought of it as one of our principal worship services – breaking bread together as the body of Christ. All through the summer, several of you opened our doors to welcome our neighbors in the water ministry. Beginning September 14th, every Wednesday evening, we’re going to host a community supper here. I hope you’ll come. I hope you’ll bring a friend, invite your neighbor. And, I hope you’ll bring someone who might not be able to repay your hospitality. I am so glad we’re doing this. And, I am excited about the work we’re doing outside because it creates a way for us to take the church out. Once we’re all out on the street corner, who knows who we might meet.

Says Rabbi Joachim Prinz. “Neighbor is not a geographic term; it’s a moral concept.” This is not only about us doing good for someone else; this is about us putting ourselves in a place to be open to receive the good someone else, someone unexpected, might offer. As it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.”

I don’t know why Jesus called them out at their dinner party in such an awkward way; I can only imagine that those Pharisees and their guests were stuck, blind to their own behavior. Sometimes we need Jesus – or the people closest to us, who love us through and through – we need them to bring us to our senses. Well, again, I’ll just preach to myself. Sometimes I need someone else to help me see what I am doing.

I wonder if there’s a step you can take this week, a boundary you can cross.

Each week, each day, we have the opportunity to choose between two paths. On one path, we ask ourselves, “what do I need? If my needs are met and I am well, all is well.” Eventually this path leads to the false promise of personal salvation, the absurd notion that somehow salvation is just between me and God.

Or, I can turn to you – to my neighbor, to those I love, and to those who I am invited to love – and ask “how are you? Is all well for you?” On this path, if you are well; indeed, if all are well, then – and only then – I am well. Until your needs are met,… until you’re fed too, and we’re all at the table, this is not yet salvation.

Today and in all Jesus’ supper teachings, he says take a step on the path that begins not with me; take a step on the that begins with your neighbor. The supper feast of God is for all. Take, eat, be glad. Take, eat, share; offer to another, and another, and another, until all are fed and all are at the table. Amen.