

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”

Date: 17 November 2019

Text: Luke 14: 16 - 24

Rev. Peter Coutts

Dinner invitations. We’ve all had them, but some stand out more than others. Take an invitation to dinner from my brother. I could not count the thousands of dinners I’ve shared with him over the years. So common that I might say, “Not this time, next time”. Then there is the kind of invitation that Greta Burger received in 2005: an invitation to have lunch with the Queen. Now, how often does that happen to any of us? Greta (who was in her 90’s) was given the honour during the Queen’s visit to Calgary because Greta had attended the Calgary Stampede every single year since it began in 1912. Greta told me she was a little shocked to receive the invitation. It was something she anticipated daily as the banquet approached. She was seated beside the Queen, whom she found to be warm and easy to talk with. Elizabeth asked her, “So, over your lifetime, have you seen many changes in Calgary?” So there are invitations... and invitations.

Jesus’ parable of the banquet is a church school favourite. It is an allegory that teaches one great truth: that our God invites us to the opportunity to share in God’s life and love. It is a story of grace. Grace that is offered to all, regardless of status. It is offered to all, freely, not something to be earned. But in unpacking this parable we see that the hinge point is how one appreciates the invitation. Some invitees hear the invitation as common (like an invite from my brother). Others saw the invitation like Greta’s invite to lunch with the Queen.

This gift of God – of life, of love – is symbolized in a banquet. Jesus called it great. He said it took time and care to prepare. It’s special. The invitation went out to many: both to people of status, wealth and wellbeing as well as to people of need. But right away the apologies, the excuses and regrets were returned by some. One said, “I’ve just bought a field that I must visit and attend to. Please excuse me”. Another said, “I’ve just bought five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out. I can’t make it today”. A third responded, “I just got married, so I can’t come”. The thing about these excuses is that they are all understandable and appropriate. And for happy reasons. That last one, in particular, is such a good excuse. Traditionally for the Jews, one could even be excused from conscription into military service if you were recently married. It’s a great excuse! These three happy, busy, successful people had bigger priorities on their minds at that moment than a banquet and that is exactly the point Jesus wanted us to get. These people were so wrapped up with how well their lives were going that they failed to appreciate the greatness, the goodness, the special nature of the banquet being offered them: life lived consciously in the Kingdom of God. Not so for a different crowd of invitees: the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. These people were also invited, and they gladly and immediately responded to the invitation. In fact, they were already sitting in the banquet hall when the servant

reported back to his master. A gift of grace – in the form of a banquet being offered to all – being offered to the wealthy and poor, to the healthy and infirmed, the happy and the distressed.

The basic point of the parable is this: those who saw their need responded. Those who could see the blessing responded. The parable is an allegory about accepting Jesus' invitation into consciously living in the Kingdom of God: now and for all eternity. This parable has been understood by many as Jesus inviting all to the gift of eternal life, salvation. But I think it is much more than that, and we can appreciate that by considering how Jesus dealt with the invitations he received from people to come to their home for dinner.

There are eight stories in the Gospels of Jesus accepting such invitations. On these occasions Jesus enacted the very same qualities of grace that we find demonstrated by the host in this parable. One invitation was from Simon the Leper. Now lepers were seen as a public health threat, so the "clean" didn't engage with them! Yet Jesus willingly crossed that boundary of stigma to accept his host's gracious hospitality. Twice Jesus accepted the hospitality of tax collectors. These were Jews who held the local franchise to collect taxes for the Romans. What they earned was what they could extract from their fellow Jew above what the Romans required. As such they were reviled by their fellow Jews. Yet Jesus, in his graciousness, crossed that boundary accepted their invitations. He also accepted invitations from Pharisees (two that we know of), the very religious leaders who were out to get him. In Jesus own behaviour around who he would dine with, he demonstrated the nature of God's grace. He said "yes", whether it was his closest friends, his religious opposition, someone considered a political traitor (like tax collectors), someone who could give him a horrible disease. Just as God, the host of the banquet in the parable, graciously extends invitations to all, so too Christ's grace accepted everyone who invited him in. I think here we can make an important observation. The parable is often understood as being about life after death: that the kingdom of God can be ours eternally. But Jesus' actions around dinner invitations in the here and now demonstrates something else clearly: God's kingdom of grace is also in the here and now, and for the here and now. And these dinner tables that Jesus sat at were places where people crossed the great divides between the wealthy and poor, to the healthy and infirmed, the happy and the distressed. In those moments when that happened Jesus was a blessing to all who gathered with him.

In the parable of the great banquet, God graciously invites all types of people, offering all a life giving gift and those who recognized their need responded to receive this blessing. In this, God crosses a boundary to us. Jesus accepted invitations to dinners, at times crossing definite social boundaries, in order to be a blessing over dinner. The kingdom of God is to be a place where people of all walks of life cross boundaries to be with one another.

What troubles me about this parable is that the banquet table is not depicted as a place of meeting for the wealthy and poor, the healthy and infirmed, the happy and the distressed...to meet at this table that represents God's kingdom of grace. The "have's" and the "happy" in the parable don't see the opportunity, as being akin to Greta being invited to lunch with the Queen. But it's more. In this. The "have's" and the "happy" are also missing out on the opportunity to sit with the "have not's", to converse over table, to hear another person's story, to have empathy and compassion grow for the one in need. The "have's" and the "happy" in the parable are off doing their own thing. So a boundary exists. Jesus crossed real social boundaries when he accepted invitations to dinner, and those gatherings around tables were moments of grace, moments of Jesus' ministry. It can be the same for us, when we cross social boundaries... wealthy with the poor, the healthy with infirmed, the happy with the distressed. When that happens, the consequent appreciation, empathy and compassion can lead to a new kind of banquet being set in the here and now: when the haves can share with the have not's. And when that happens, the banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven moves into the here and now, and helps the world to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is now here in our midst.

The newspaper this week provided me with a story that illustrates this very point. Lori Wood is a nurse (with 35 years experience) living near Atlanta. Recently Jonathan Pinkard was admitted on her ward. Pinkard is 27 years old and one of the working poor. He works as an office clerk but lives in a men's shelter. He has no family. He was admitted because of his serious heart condition. In fact, he learned 4 months ago that he needs a heart transplant. He also learned that he was not eligible for a transplant, because he was homeless and did not have people to support him post-surgery. Pinkard's situation was hopeless. His nurse, Lori, learned of his dilemma and she made a decision: she invited Jonathan to move in with her and her adult son and offered to be Jonathan's support post-surgery. Jonathan told a reporter later, "I couldn't believe that somebody who had known me only two days would do this. It was almost like a dream." Lori, for her part, said that she never does this kind of thing... that she doesn't blurr the line between her professional work and her private life (and with that statement acknowledged the expected boundary that is supposed to exist between her and the sick). So why did she cross that boundary? She says, "At some point, God places people in situations in your life, and you have a choice to do something about it. For me there was no choice. I'm a nurse. I have an extra room. It was not something I struggled with. He had to come home with me." A person saw a need and responded. She crossed a boundary, and by doing so she is now a blessing to a man who could not qualify for life-giving treatment.

Now I am not suggesting that you go out to invite the homeless to live with you. Rather, I think this parable and Jesus' actions point out something that can happen far too easily: that our focus and the busy-ness of our lives can lead to us overlooking the needs of others. That the accepted social boundaries that exist also impede us in helping with the needs of others. And what we need is a place of interaction, engagement...that we might discover the place where the grace of God is needed. In other words, we need to enact God's banquet table of grace here. It could be across the fence with your neighbour, across the table in the breakroom at work, or when sitting shoulder to shoulder with another parent at the hockey practice.

Why? We are here because we have heard that invitation to the banquet, We have come to God's table of grace and we have benefitted from that grace. But grace is for the sharing. As the slave said in the parable, "there is still room"... always room.