“Spite”

A Meditation on Luke 14: 16 – 24

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church June 2, 2019

The trouble with parables is that we want them to be easy. We need them to be simple. And every so often, we get what we want. But more often than not, we discover there are deeply intricate puzzles that cannot be reduced to straightforward morals. This is not first grade arithmetic. This is mind-blowing calculus.

In today’s story we want A + B = C. We say, the host of the party is God, or Jesus. Take your pick. The invited guests who change their RSVPs at the last minute are people who are too busy for God. The second tier guests - the forgotten, the lost, and the excluded - they are all those people for whom God is concerned. They are the people for whom we should care. There are other, well established interpretations of this story. The original guests are the Jewish people who do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and the second group of guests are the Gentiles, who are welcomed in. But let’s *not* throw our Jewish family under the bus, nor presume that we know what it means to be welcomed into God’s kin-dom.

Let’s be honest – we don’t *really* see ourselves in this parable. We aren’t the ones who are too busy – we are here in church on a beautiful summer morning! Still, we don’t we want to be placed with the “losers” who were not invited the first time around. Pity? We don’t want that! In our minds we are merely viewers, observers, listening in to this parable. We are above it, beyond it. Merely here to hope that the original audience understood what we already perceive: everyone is welcome at God’s table.

If it were only that simple.

God didn’t invite us to be editors, bystanders or critics. God didn’t invite us to stand outside the story, but to enter into it. Here we go…back to square one.

God can’t be the host of the party. Nor Jesus. He can’t be the host, either. If the host were God – or Jesus - *the first round of* *invitations* would have gone to society’s lost, forgotten and excluded. (In addition to “the poor,” the parable mentions, the crippled, blind, and lame” and these various impairments would have placed them in the excluded and lost category. Their physical challenges would most likely have caused them to be impoverished. They definitely would have been considered “sinful,” as the community considered physical ailments to be a consequence of underlying spiritual darkness.)

And there goes Jesus, passing out the invitations in the back alleys and on the street corners. At the local dive. At the mini-mart. At the nursing home. At the Salvation Army shelter and the domestic violence shelter. At North Harbor. At the park bench that serves as someone’s bed. Can someone stop him??!! Look, now he’s headed toward the prison. For all these reasons, Jesus can’t be the host in this parable.

The host in this story invites his peers, his equals. He invites the people who will return the favor. That’s how it works in the real world. When they don’t show, *after his servants have worked their fingers to the bone*, he is furious. He is hurt. He is embarrassed. He is…lonely. Throwing a party is a little bit frightening, at the very least, anxiety producing. Will everyone click? Will the conversation sparkle? Will they appreciate the trendy appetizers? Will the new friend feel included? And the most stressful question of all: will they even show up?

And they don’t. They send their sincere regrets, and their excellent excuses. Top notch reasons in Jesus’ day: “security, prestige and family” (Mark Ralls, Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2). Purchasing land was the wisest step to insure economic security. Owning five pair of oxen? Extremely rare and very prestigious. Getting married? Family was everything in first century Palestine. Children ensured your name would live on.

What happens next is why I think this parable has a thread we often overlook. Yes, it is about missing out on breaking bread with God at the heavenly table, but it is also about something much more practical. Much more urgent. Maybe it is about how God works through us in our brokenness. Maybe it is about how God always shows up for us, and what happens when God arrives.

The host, we are told, throws a temper tantrum. He explodes. All of those powerful emotions overflow in him and without stopping to consider the implications, he sends his servants out to bring in people with whom he would have never broken bread. He might have dropped some coins in their baskets if they were begging on the city streets. He surely would have given his offering at the Temple, an offering that would have been used to help the orphans and widows. He might have even tried to help a crippled man find employment. But break bread with them? At his table? Probably not.

Until the day he was so hurt and angry, that he reacted swiftly and the consequences were deep. It seems to me that his thinking ran like this, “I’ll show them! I’ll show my so called friends! I’ll make them jealous!” It seemed like a great scheme. Except that when they heard about the revised guest list, they were definitely not jealous. Shocked? Oh, yeah! Confused and concerned? Most definitely! “He did what??!!” they were heard to say to one another as they sighed and shook their heads.

The original guests could see that their friend has a bigger problem than “no shows.” Everyone - everyone – knows where he lives now! And everyone – everyone who “isn’t anyone” (in society’s eyes) will return to his door. And he will no longer be able to walk past them as they spend their days begging. It won’t be enough to drop a few coins in their begging basket. Now he knows their names. Now he knows their stories. He will never be the same because he has seen what God’s table looks like and it isn’t like anything he had imagined.

He will be labeled “crazy.”   
The neighbors will tell the story of the day he “went over the edge,” and they will say, with sorrow in their voices, “if only one of us had gone that day??!!” But what the host later realizes, or his spouse points out for him - is that God worked through his anger and pain to carry him over to a better feast than the one he had planned. God carried him through his feelings of rejection and loneliness to a party that was filled with love and laughter.

The host wasn’t trying to break down barriers.

He wasn’t looking for rewards or glory.

*He was trying to spite his friends*.

And God laughed – a wonderful belly laugh –

because God knew how this would play out.

And God used that angry emotion because God can use all of our spite, all of our resentment, all of our grief, all of our pride,

all of every messy emotion that makes us human.

Because God, unlike the host of this party,

has compassion, acts with compassion, pours out compassion;

a compassion that will always carry us over to a bigger table,

a brighter table, a truer table than any we could set for ourselves.

In spite of our spite, God’s welcome will be wide.

In spite of ourselves, God’s welcome will be wide.

And we will be both guest and host as we discover what it means to eat at Christ’s table.

Thanks be to God, for setting a place for us.

Thanks be to Jesus, who in humor and honesty reveals to us the ways of God.

Thanks be to the Spirit, who in mystery and delight, makes us one.

Thanks be to God. Amen.