

The Welcome Table

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 4) 2022

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The great Christian monastic and writer, Thomas Merton, once described the civil rights movement as the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States (*Faith and Violence*, p. 131). Which is why you have heard me talk about it so much. It is one of the places where we can see clearly the church being the church and doing what it was called to do. At least this was true in the African American church.

One of the central and most formative actions of the civil rights movement was the “sit-in” at lunch counters and cafes across the South. The inspiration for the sit-ins came directly from our Gospel reading for this morning, this parable of the marriage feast, which was told in the middle of a dinner for Jesus and his disciples given by a prominent Pharisee. It is a parable about everyone having a place at the table.

Fannie Lou Hamer, the great civil rights leader from Ruleville, Mississippi, echoing an old hymn, imagined the church and the civil rights movement “as a welcome table,” like a big church potluck dinner where the abundant riches of home cooking would be spread out for everyone to enjoy – everyone. Fannie Lou Hamer said that even Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and Senator James O. Eastland could come to the Welcome Table, though, she said, “they would need to learn some manners” (Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, p. 89).

Mrs. Hamer had it right. We are to be a “welcome table.” The image comes from right here in Luke 14. In this parable Jesus talks about everyone having a place at the table – where everyone is fed.

Jesus tells this parable in the middle of a dinner. First, he directs his comments toward those who are guests and then, he turns his teaching toward the host. Every one of us, at one time or another, have been either the guest or the host. This parable is for us. And like all of Jesus’ parables, it is to form our imagination in such a way that it becomes how we see wherever we are. It becomes the lens, the eyeglasses, through which we look at the world.

Here at this table, in this worship, and in this old book, through these old hymns, we are given an alternative way of looking and seeing and imagining. For example, while others look around and see people from Central America “invading” *our* way of life and threatening *our* well-being, we look around and ask questions like, “How can we make room at the table for everyone?”

Another example: Public schools are premised upon this same notion: all children should have the opportunity for a quality education, not just those who can afford a private education. So this parable and the rest of the New Testament trains us to ask questions both personal and structural: What can we do to help all our children receive a quality education? How can we improve public funding of our public schools and what are the obstacles to improving our public schools?

And we ask these same questions about our city. Is everyone included? Why not? Is there affordable housing for everyone? Is there affordable and accessible

transportation for everyone? Does everyone have accessibility to nutritious food or are there food deserts? Why? What can we do about it? Who else is asking these questions?

In 1994 some concerned citizens were asking these kinds of questions about the southeast part of town. It was a food desert with high poverty rates. But some people got together and formed “HOPE,” for “Helping Other People Eat.” Many of you volunteer there and have for a long time. Each Holy Communion Sunday, like today, following the benediction we’ll have ushers at the exits with baskets to receive your freewill offering of extra money to help HOPE. The forecast is that in about a month or so, Jo’s Diner will open for one mid-day a week meal served in the building next to HOPE. That will be in addition to the 1400 families who are fed a month from the food pantry. That’s families. In the U.S. right now, we usually count a family as 2.5 people. So multiply that by 1400 and HOPE is feeding about 3500 people per month. Truly a welcome table.

We see our lives, our world through the lens of this parable. This is who God is. This is what God intends – a welcome table, where everyone has a place.

Here is the essential: it is not our table. This is the welcome table of the Lord. Everyone who comes to the Lord’s Table is fed by grace. What makes the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind unique is that they know it while the others don’t.

One of the things I want us to notice is one of the things Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer said. There is an etiquette, there are particular manners to be learned and

practiced at this welcome table of the Lord. As she said, even Governor Ross Barnett and Senator James O. Eastland, two strong Mississippi proponents of racial segregation and racism in the early 60's, are welcome, "though they would need to learn some manners." All are welcome but all are to learn how to behave at this table.

At this table, there is no scrambling for places of honor. Indeed, at this table we learn to practice humility and patience. We are patient enough to wait – not rush to get the best seat and not rush to be first so we can hurry up and rush on to all of the other things we have to do. We make room for the outcasts, the stranger, and the poor. We make room for those who are not welcome anywhere else. Governors don't sit at the head-table at the welcome table; refugees from Central America do.

This means a welcome table church, and a welcome table city and welcome table school are places where we learn and grow and change. It means we're mixed in at the table with all sorts of people with different ideas and perspectives but at the table, while passing the mashed potatoes, we're listening to someone different tell us a story from a new perspective to us.

Robin Kimmerer in his book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, says that one of the hallmarks of a well-educated person is to be able to welcome, engage, and evaluate various points of view. Kimmerer is not simply talking about formal education. He's a trained scientist who has also learned from his Potawatomi Nation.

One of the most important aspects of public-school education is that children and youth from different places, races, ethnic groups, and various other perspectives all learn together, sing in choir, play in the band, play sports, and on and on – together.

When I was a brand-new young pastor and was preaching hard on race and racism, I learned that many of my presumptions were wrong. Sitting around someone's table, or on their porch, or working alongside of church members in their garden, listening, talking, learning, I learned that most of the racist prejudice of my church members had nothing to do with hate. It had everything to do with fear. Paying attention to that fear changed the way I preached and changed how I saw my people.

I would never have learned something new and incredibly important for a young pastor and probably our church would not have changed, if we had not been a welcome table kind of church where I was mixed in with people who were different.

Here at this table, together we practice service and inter-dependency. C. S. Lewis tells this story of the difference in heaven from hell. In hell, no one has elbows and is given long-handled spoons with which to eat. No one can eat because each is focused upon himself or herself as individuals, and they can't feed themselves. But in heaven, with the same predicament of no elbows and only long-handled spoons, everyone feeds one another.

So think of the church as lifetime training in proper manners: servanthood,

loving attention to others, humility, patience, community where we are interdependent upon each other, and where room is made for outcasts. All are welcome at this table but if you come, we expect proper manners.

James Forbes, one of the great preachers in the country, grew up in a large family in North Carolina. As he and his siblings grew into their teenage years getting them all to the dinner table each evening, at the same time, became a chore, because one or more of the kids might be in football practice or drama or at a job and might be late to supper. Plus, Forbes' father was an AME preacher, and they were always having church members in and out of the house or visiting friends, colleagues, preachers, and maybe even some relatives. Forbes said it was not uncommon to have his 7 brothers and sisters, an aunt and uncle, another preacher and his wife, and an assortment of cousins and kids and friends. They might have 20 people at supper. He remembers it as loud and joyous as people came to the big table heaped high with wonderful southern cooking, much of it right out of the garden. All these people gathered around the table, but before anyone could begin, even before the table blessing, Mrs. Forbes got everyone's attention and asked, "Are all the children in?" The family would look around to see if anyone was missing, and someone might say, "So-and-so is at choir practice." And Mrs. Forbes would take make a plate of food, put it in the oven, and then say, "Okay, now we can begin." Then Rev. Forbes would lead in the blessing, and everyone would pile into the wonderful food.

Here we learn to ask, "Are all the children in?" And if not, we put aside the food, the resources needed to include all the children. And because we learn it here, we also learn to ask it in our wider society, "Are all the children in?" Is

everyone included? Is there a place for all people?

By way of reminder, being a welcome table church is our DNA at Austin Heights. It always has been. In April 1968 we were organized to be a congregation welcoming other races and diverse points of view. In 1970, the pastors of Austin Heights and Zion Hill ate lunch together on a regular basis and came up with the idea of our two congregations partnering together in worship. At the heart of our joint worship services were the Table of the Lord's Supper followed by a massive church supper. In October 1991 we had a "Service of Hope for Persons Whose Lives Have Been Touched by AIDS" in which all colors, all sizes, all kinds, especially gay and straight came. We prayed together, sang together, read Scripture together, cried together and then joined together for a big potluck feast where everyone had a place at the table.

In 1992 we organized a diverse leadership group from our city to view the new movie *Malcom X*, together. We came back here to Austin Heights for a roundtable discussion and shared a meal – together.

We could go on – together we shared meals and lives in the aftermath of Hurricane Rita in 2005. Ten years ago, we hosted numbers of young environmental activists who were trying to block the TransCanada Keystone XL tarsands pipeline. Every Sunday after worship, we had soup and salad for everyone.

It all starts right here, at this table.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.