

September 2, 2007
Open Prairie United Church of Christ
Rev. Curran Reichert

Enter, Rejoice and Come In

Gospel Reading **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

Tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day. A day off from work, which is, in its many forms, essential for the well-being of the human race. No matter what form it takes human labor shapes and provides for our society. When patterns of work change, society also changes. Many countries around the world set aside a day to honor working people, and to recognize the many achievements established to protect the safety and integrity of workers. This morning then, it seems fitting to pause for a moment to remember those throughout the year whose jobs have led to the loss of their own lives; firefighters, police officers, miners, rescue and health workers and sadly this year even teachers. Let’s just take a moment to be in silence.

... Lovers and caregivers one and all, they shall be missed.

Enter, rejoice and come in! What is that phrase referring to?

Can you think of moments in your life when you have had cause to enter, rejoice and come in, moments of celebration...

Yes, today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.

Open yourselves to the song. What does that mean, open yourselves to the song? Music has the power to transform us doesn't it? It pulls us out, opens us up. We begin worship by singing because it helps us to get present, help us open up to the moment. It is hard to think about anything else when we are singing in full voice, right? Open yourselves to the song.

Open your hearts everyone. In the Gospel passage this morning, Jesus is dining at a Pharisee's home. Jesus tells a story about a banquet, a story designed to teach his disciples the importance of being welcoming to all, including those who live outside the traditions and beliefs of the community. Open your hearts everyone. Open your hearts everyone. Today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change. Whoa, what, what?! Change? Did someone say change? Snuck it in there in the third verse when we were all feeling safe. Change...change is scary.

Let me tell you what Jesus has to say about change this morning. He's come to talk to us at the place where he knows we will pay the most attention-he's come to talk to us at the dinner table.

Because we love our food don't we-yup! We love our food almost as much as we love the people with whom we eat. Well, this isn't a new phenomenon; people have prized the experience of dining above almost all else throughout time and memoriam.

In the ancient Eastern world (which is where our story takes place) the table and what happened around it was exceptionally important. Remember now, there were no grocery stores in the ancient world, no quickie mart to run out to for a loaf of bread and some milk. Let's be clear, there were no microwave meals, no box mixes, imagine that. It was like Ron's slow food night all the time.

And because that was the reality it took a great deal of time to make preparations for a big meal and community life functioned around corporate feasts. Even religious teaching centered around big community meals, which generally happened in two parts so that in the middle the Rabbi's could get some teaching in. During the intermission there was an extended period of dialogue. It wasn't like people had to get back in time to watch their favorite TV show. The meal was what was going on.

So, if we were going to try to get a point across about change, it would make perfect sense to tell a story about a feast right?

That is what Jesus is doing, so you can bet that he feels this is one of his more important messages to get across. But Jesus, as you might have guessed does not always play by the rules... and there were a lot of rules accompanying meals in that day.

The first rule of Greco- Roman hierarchy as it related to the meal has to do with seating arrangements. Meals were most often set around a U-shaped arrangement of couches-this was called a triclinium. This meant there was an open space in and out of which servers could move. "Seating within the triclinium was reserved for those with the greatest status or honor."¹ The Jewish common meal also had designated seating for the honored and powerful, so it is not as if Jesus did not know the rules. In fact, he knew the rules so well that he understood if he were to upset the seating chart-he would upset the whole apple cart. So, what does he do, he tells his followers to avoid the seats of honor and opt for say...the floor.

More import than us having a seat of honor-it is that everyone be offered a seat and if ours is free there is room for the other. But hold on a minute, what kind of "other" are we talking about here? Don't be afraid of some change, just have a whole lot scarier.

Who is the "other" that Jesus is talking about?

¹ Sermon found in the Christian Century September 2, 2007. Written by Tim Conder pastor of Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina.

None other than the undesirables of course. It is unfortunate that his descriptions starts by naming those who are differently abled and implies that they would have nothing to render in return for services offered, that is unfortunate language to use in a story about liberation. So, for our purposes, we have to find a new definition for those who are considered undesirable or other.

Who might they be today?

Who might it be that Jesus is asking us to include?

And what, do you suppose, is the bigger message here?

It is, I believe, that as long as one is oppressed none are free. Sound familiar. It is that we must be willing to relinquish our stronghold on box seats, so that everyone can get in the stadium. The more important point, I think, is this as long as we believe we are entitled to a certain position that posits us above someone else, we labor under the illusion that we as human beings are in competition with each other. That my friends, is the oppressors lie, it positions people against people.

Tomorrow is Labor day- we are celebrating people who work for an honest living and a decent wage and yet we are still caught in the trap of putting some jobs above others. We send our kids to college so that they will be more likely to get a "good" job. But what does that say about the rest of the labor force, are their jobs less important? Do they deserve any less of a day off? No, of course not, but that is what gets perpetuated in a system of hierarchy.

The idea that some people are less valuable than others because of their jobs or position in society.

Jesus' table story is designed to help us recognize that in God's eyes being upwardly mobile and competitive are not the signs of a life well lived. The values of faithful people, Jesus suggests, are quite different.

Enter, rejoice and come in. Not because we are important but because God says we are worthy. We come not because we deserve to, but because we have been invited and it is our great joy to share a meal at God's table where all are welcome. And we will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south not because we have something to prove, but because the love in our hearts compels us to come to God's table. Today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.

Amen

Invitation to Communion based on **Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

And so beloved we have nothing to loose by opening our hearts to share all we have with others.

Enter, rejoice and come in for this is the feast of God for the people of God all are welcome at this table.