

Guest List
Luke 13:24-30

Timothy L. Carson
July 15, 2018

You could call it a divine disruption. In one of Jesus' parables the guest list has been misplaced and all the people who were originally supposed to come to dinner are not included. Instead a whole new group of guests are invited but from another list no one recognizes. The whole occasion has become a colossal confusion and all the rules of propriety have been broken. Suddenly there is a blurring between who is in and who is out. In God's kingdom the old rule book becomes irrelevant. All expectations are upended.

The perplexing story concludes with a Jesus saying that blows all the doors out: "The people will come from east and west, north and south, and recline at the table of God. Some are last who will be first, and some first who will be last." (29-30)

Part of this saying comes from Psalm 103:7 and reflects a hope that the exiles will be gathered back in from their many wilderness wanderings.

The guest list of the great future table is made up of those stumbling back home. And what we share in the present moment is a foretaste of a table that is yet to come.

As we hear the parable we may be asking if we are on the guest list, and that's a good question. How are we RSVPing to the invitation?

If we dare open ourselves to the surprising guest list of the kingdom we may expand our view to include the east and west, north and south. We may crane our necks to look beyond the horizon, to the highways and byways, the least expected locales. And we may be surprised to see who is sitting beside us as the old pecking order breaks down.

Where will we find the wilderness exiles searching for home? Every direction from where we are standing – east and west, north and south.

Who is doing the inviting? God is. But we can help. We can stay awake, on the lookout for the exiles.

In 2008 the Mortimer family engaged in a daunting journey, a bike ride across the country beginning in Washington State and concluding at the Statue of Liberty. They were driven by faith and their theme became the title of a book, *Hope and Courage across America*. One of the most remarkable aspects is that earlier in his life Bob Mortimer, the husband and father, was terribly injured in an electric power line accident and lost both legs and one arm. He rode his recumbent bicycle powered by only one arm.

As they were riding up a mountain through the rain one day the downpour became so severe that they had to exit the highway to take cover. It seemed like the Spirit was putting obstacles in the way of the very mission they thought was guided by the Spirit. They took shelter in a roadside café where they decided to go ahead and have lunch. As they began to share their meal their teenaged daughter, Nicole, said to her parents, “Look, that baby is choking!” Across the way a baby was indeed choking and the mother had not yet noticed.

Nicole ran across the restaurant just in time for the mother to shriek with terror that her baby couldn’t breathe. She took the baby from her mother, laid her across one arm and thumped her on the back until the airway was cleared and all was well. She had learned the Heimlich maneuver for babies as a part of her education.

Afterwards Nicole’s father, Bob, mused to himself about his supposedly important schedule. He just *thought* he had a schedule, a plan, but is he really in charge? A storm pummels the mountain, semi-trucks soak the riders, and they are stopped in their tracks, forced off the road. But to what, to where? To a restaurant where a baby was choking and one of the riders was already trained to help (51-54).

They will come from the east and west, the north and south, to recline in the Kingdom of God.

What direction will God take you next? Who is coming to you from parts unknown? Who is meant to join your table or who are you meant to invite?

What tables are destined to be drawn together to create one, big table? Who is on your surprising guest list?

If our celebration of the Lord's Supper every Sunday is like a rehearsal dinner before the wedding banquet, who do you want to invite to the table, the one exile searching for a way home? Come from the east and west, north and south.

If we locate a spiritual traveler, a wanderer, the stranger, the exile, someone lost and looking for home, we may need to help them to the table. They may not know where to go or where to find it. And we can reassure them along the way that there is plenty of room at the table.

If you were to make a short list right now of five people you would invite to join you at Christ's table, who would they be? Someone who has never shared in a community of faith but desperately needs one? A person who gave up on the church of their childhood but is now open to something new?

How about the person who has outgrown the faith tradition where they have been and are looking for something deeper, more challenging? What about the Christian who has been swept into the allure of the mega-church, a kind of religious Wal Mart Superstore, but has grown tired of the mass marketing and entertaining the religious consumer? Very often those *Six Flags over Jesus* churches have a revolving back door. Have you thought of inviting them to the table of a real congregation?

Who are you willing to invite from east and west, north and south? Who is on the surprising guest list of the kingdom?

But while you are composing your surprising guest list, let me share another facet of the story with you.

To be sure the four directions – east and west, north and south – are often used to describe the farthest boundaries of the known world, the places and people beyond our knowledge.

But the four directions also carry an inner, more spiritual meaning. In symbolic and mystical art through the centuries, in the content found in fairy tales and dreams, the four directions represent the divided aspects of the person - scattered, isolated and fragmented. Coming to the center, drawing all the directions together as one, is the ultimate unifying act.

In the same way that the surprising guest list of exiles draws together the many so they may become one, so the divided and scattered self, torn, tossed and conflicted, is drawn into the balance and harmony of the Spirit. All is one.

If we have a divided mind, if we are beside ourselves, if we long for the peace that passes understanding, this remarkable story is for us. In the very center of our temple, in the holy of holies, the many aspects of us from east and west, north and south, gather together around one table. There is bread and wine, and we are one with the host with whom we dine.

Indeed, when we gather in from the many directions to the unity of the Spirit what had seemed to be first is often shown to be unimportant, and what seemed to be last and insignificant is shown to be of the upmost importance.

Sometimes it takes a storm to drive us off the road to find what we really need. Sometimes the guest list of our lives is revised mid-stream. But always the strange and merciful ways of God take us toward the future where we need to be, grateful souls reclining before the mystery of God.