

October 7, 2007

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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
World Wide Communion Sunday

Table Talk

Luke 14:15-23

The table is set. The guests are invited. The feasting begins not only here at Meridian Street, but all over the world. This is a High Holy Day in the Christian Church. This is a day when the table of grace is evident not only before us, but the table of grace stretches around the world. This is a day to put aside differences, obstacles, and challenges and celebrate one race, the human race, forgiven, blessed and redeemed. This is a day of hope, joy and peace.

In the beginning of the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are told that on one Sabbath, Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee. What follows is a body of teachings that Jesus shares at that meal. The table talk that night speaks to healing on the Sabbath, to the demeanor of a guest, to the generous nature of a host and then we encounter this parable.

Gospel of Luke chapter 14:15-23.

Jesus structures the conversation at the table to be beneficial to those who are gathered yet his table talk stretches across the centuries and includes us as we feast at his table this day.

Prayer

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. As I understand it, a great banquet in those ancient times might go on for days. It would only be one of great wealth who could invite many guests, house them and feed them for days. It was also the custom to invite a philosopher or teacher to a banquet. This honored guest would lead the conversation each evening. The pattern was that the one providing the banquet would offer two invitations. The first would be given early, letting people know that a banquet was being prepared. The actual day and time of the banquet might be a little unsure, but once invited, the guest would receive the second invitation saying that the banquet was ready and it was time to arrive. In the parable, it appears that people said "yes" to the original invitation, but then when the time came to actually go to the feast, they were detained by other realities in their life. Their first "yes" ultimately became a "no". They could not be distracted from the busyness of their lives.

Sound familiar? How many times have we accepted an invitation to a wedding or a party and when the time arrived to go to that event, we find ourselves wishing we could just stay home. What seemed like a wonderful idea in the beginning becomes a burden rather than a blessing. We have all had that experience. However, Jesus speaks to a much deeper issue.

We have said “yes” to Jesus. We have been baptized and blessed, but when it comes to living out each and every day in the radical grace of Jesus, we find ourselves occupied by other demands or desires in our life. We shrink back from being the honored guest at Christ’s banquet and we, too, offer our excuses why we cannot participate.

Well, the man who is giving the banquet finds that the table is set, the food is prepared, but his guests are now otherwise detained. So he gets creative and sends his servant out into the streets to invite strangers to his table. In the language of that day, “bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” He invited those who were marginalized in his community. In the language of our day he might have said “bring in the poor, the brokenhearted, the lost and those who have stumbled in life.” In both realities, he is inviting those who were not on the “A” list, those who would not be able to reciprocate with an invitation to the host in the future, those who were not accustomed to being invited to great affairs. They became the honored guests and it appears they found no excuse to keep them from the table.

What excuses do we use to keep ourselves at arms’ length from receiving grace and sharing grace? You and I know that the list of excuses is long. Even when we look at our own lives, we limit the radical grace that we are willing to receive fearing that it might make a claim on our lives that would actually cause change within us and we limit those who we find acceptable to receive the grace of God. We live in a narrow understanding of our faith and of God’s grace. We cut ourselves off from the overwhelming blessings of God and attempt to limit God’s expression of grace for others.

The talk at this table is about a radical, all consuming, eternal grace that is offered to all this day and every day. Grace is God’s gift, deserved by none, but given anyway. God loves humankind eternally. Grace is offered anew in this feast.

There are faith traditions that close off the communion table, but that is not our tradition. The very reason that I am a United Methodist is the fact that the table is open to all, for only if grace is available to all will it be available to me. Jesus nourishes us with grace at this banquet. He has decided the guest list. He began the conversation. It is not up to you or to me to narrow the gift of grace, it is merely up to us to accept its radical nature and do our best to live within the grace that is offered in such abundance.

In ancient times there were two invitations to a banquet. We all have accepted the first invitation. We have said “yes” to the love of Jesus. But now it is time to take the next step, to grow in our relationship with the Divine, to offer ourselves fully to our God. The table

is set this day and the feast stretches around the world. Invited to this feast are those we may not like, those we may not trust, those who have little in common with you or with me. This feast is served in mighty cathedrals and thatched huts today. All are invited as honored guests. All are greeted with welcome and love. All are cherished and offered the grace. This decision not ours, but Jesus the Christ's. In that reality, we are honored guests, we are greeted with love, we are cherished and offered grace.

I read a story back in 2004 about a bridge that had been restored in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The bridge dates back to the 1600s when Turkish architects found a way to connect the two banks of the Neretva River in the town of Mostar. The suspension bridge covered the deep water of the river and connected the Muslim community on one side the bridge to the Christian Croat community on the other side of the bridge. The two communities have had deep differences for generations. However, both communities would gather as young men turning 16 years of age would dive off the bridge into the river below. It was seen as a long held rite of passage as young men "dove into adulthood." It did not matter if the 16 year old was Muslim or Christian, all those gathered on both sides of the bridge would applaud, offering their best wishes.

Of course, the diving stopped when the war began in that part of the world and in 1993 the bridge was destroyed.

In 2004, the BBC offered this headline, "Mostar Bridge Opens with Splash." The bridge was rebuilt using the same kind of materials and methods used 500 years ago. The celebration of the opening of the bridge included dances on the bridge and divers off the bridge. On the festivities of that day, Lord Ashdown was quoted in the article saying that on this day, "hope triumphs over barbarism."

The bridge becomes a symbol of grace. The bridge connects those who carry deep wounds and mistrust. Yet, in the building of the bridge there is the hope of a new day.

It is that kind of hope that is inherent in this day. This table is set for all, even for one we might call enemy. We did not create the guest list, but by God's grace we are on that guest list. The invitation is offered, the question: will we accept? Will we allow the grace of this day to live in our lives every day?

On the front flap of Ernest Hemingway's' book entitled *The Moveable Feast*, these words are found, "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for yours is a moveable feast."

That is the image for this feast. This meal goes with us wherever we go. It lives within us, not only in this moment, but shapes for us the way we see the world and live in the world. It is grace that shapes our view as we encounter the harsh realities of this world. It is grace that gives us the imagination to see the Kingdom of God before us. It is grace that inspires us to form our words and our actions from the teachings of Jesus rather than the teachings

of this world. It is grace that moves us to build bridges, to live with hope and to partner with God as we reshape this world together. It is a moveable feast. One we carry with us forever.

This bread in this feast represents the body of Christ. This cup represents the blood of Christ, shed for you and for me and for all. Forgiveness, blessing, salvation offered. The invitation is given to us this day. May we resist making any excuses, but give ourselves this day fully and completely as a joyful offering of life and love to our God.

This is a high holy day. A day of transformation. A day of hope, a day of joy, a day of peace. May that reality shine through not only this day, but every day. May we take the grace from this feast and allow it to shape our living as a disciple of Christ and a citizen of the world.