Imagine yourself attending this dinner party depicted in the Gospel of Luke. You are a Jewish male, well connected, and very pious when it comes to observing the finer points of Torah. A slave arrives at your house a few days before the dinner with an invitation. On the evening of the party, you walk with friends to the host’s home. A slave washes off the dirt, grime, and animal manure you stepped in while walking outside all day. He puts oil and expensive perfume on you so that hints of cinnamon and ginger mask your body odor.

A servant walks you to the dining room where all the guests have gathered. The host steps forward, kisses you on the cheek, and embraces you. He asks about your family, your business, your studies. When it’s time to eat, you take your place at the table. If you are a distinguished religious scholar or a family friend, you may sit down near the host and get the best cuts of meat: the filet, the tenderloin, the rib eye. If you are a distant cousin, a business associate, or maybe a disciple of an invited rabbi, you may sit closer to the back door. Servants bring you some lesser cuts of meat, the ground chuck, a little plate of vegetables, maybe a taste of second-rate wine from the storeroom.

As this particular dinner goes on, a country rabbi with a strong accent starts to crack jokes about the seating arrangements. He makes fun of the guests who rushed in to get the good seats. Even worse, he insults the host for his choice in company. No one laughs; instead people start to argue. “What’s the meaning of this? What kind of ingrate comes in as a welcomed guest, eats at the host’s table, and then insults everyone?” (Pause)

Now imagine that you’re someone else, a follower of Jesus since his earliest preaching in Galilee. Jesus enters the house as an honored guest, but you stand outside. You’ve been walking for days with hardly anything to eat. Maybe, if you’re lucky, someone will come out after dinner and throw some loaves of dry bread to the crowd as an act of charity.

The rumor is that this Jesus can heal the sick, and so you’ve carried your child with you for miles. You have no money for doctors. Jesus is your last hope to stop the
fever that has wracked your child with chills and pain. The crowd is so large that it’s taken days to even get within sight of Jesus. Now he’s left everyone to attend this dinner party.

Now while you’re outside, wringing your hands, shouting erupts inside the house. Other guests boo and hiss. Suddenly everyone is yelling, the gate doors of the house fly open, and you can make out Jesus’ parting shot as he leaves: “When you throw a party, don’t invite your friends, your family, your wealthy neighbors, the people who can repay you! Invite instead the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” And with that, the rabbi from Galilee storms out with his disciples. He sets his face toward the road to Jerusalem, and walks on with hundreds of followers behind him.

Luke tells us that you just can’t take Jesus anywhere. He can be a real party pooper. This story is about how a respectable member of society invites Jesus to a fine dinner. Jesus manages to insult everyone and get kicked out. Inviting Jesus as a guest to anything is tricky, because you never know what he’ll say or do. He especially disrupts comfortable situations when there’s an urgent need for justice right outside the door.

Sometimes the urgency of the call for justice comes with deep discomfort, risk of embarrassment, and even great cost. There’s a lot of talk about the civil rights movement in the South. But Indiana, my home state, had its own difficult history as well. My great-grandfather Ortho Scales served as the president of the Indiana YMCA during the late 1950s and early 1960s. And there was a point in the early 60s when Martin Luther King visited Indianapolis briefly to help organize civil rights demonstrations. My great-grandfather believed in civil rights. He stood firmly against the Ku Klux Klan when they threatened him and his businesses. He took great care introducing Dr. King to influential business leaders, pastors, and politicians in Indiana.

I wish I could say that this story is about a friendship that developed between my great-grandfather and Martin Luther King, but it’s not. Ortho Scales and Dr. King disagreed on the urgency for radical change regarding civil rights. Ortho believed that change would come gradually, with a groundswell of public support and eventual changes to legislation in the statehouse. More time would allow a civil rights movement to develop, and integration would gradually become a natural part of a more enlightened society.

Dr. King believed that true justice would come through direct action: peaceful demonstrations, and non-violent sit-ins, and public boycott of businesses who segregated blacks and whites.
I’ve learned from stories my grandmother told me that Martin Luther King’s methods made my great-grandfather very anxious. The protests, the fears of riots, the threat of arrest for prominent community leaders, all this could be very disruptive and even dangerous. Martin Luther King was in town for only a few days, but he and Ortho parted in disagreement about the best way to pursue civil rights.

Yes, the call to stand up for justice can be uncomfortable. Jesus’ words at a dinner party for the wealthy stung his host sharply and embarrassed him in front of his guests. This host lost face, he was shamed in front of guests by Jesus, which is about the worst thing that could happen in the Ancient Near East. Ortho Scales, a man who cared about justice, felt uneasy at the prospect of disruption and disorder from a dramatic push for civil rights.

But let’s consider on this 50th anniversary of the March on Washington what it might be like to be dis-inherited, disenfranchised, cast out and told that you do not belong. What would it have been like to stand outside that Pharisee’s house, unwelcome because he sees you as nothing but a poor nobody? What would it have been like to be treated as a second class citizen in Indianapolis; unable to stay in a hotel, or get a bank loan, or even eat at a lunch counter because of the color of your skin?

What comes to mind for me are these excerpts that Martin Luther King wrote from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama: “Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;… when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

We are Christians, disciples of Jesus, the rude guest who left that dinner party over two thousand years ago. Living up to that name demands devoting our lives to the work of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. That same drama between justice and disenfranchisement, inclusion and exclusion, is playing out today. That is why people in our congregation like Lib McGregor Simmons, and John and Missy Kuykendall, and Linda Steber, and Paddy and Franny Millen have been marching this summer in Raleigh with Moral Monday demonstrations.
Perhaps you disagree with the legislature in Raleigh, or the protestors, or maybe it’s a “pox on both houses” for the whole bunch altogether. I get it. My point is not that you have to get on board with every issue that the Moral Monday protests in Raleigh have been about. My point is to hold up friends among us who have shown courage in speaking out on matters of justice. These protestors are acting on a conviction that is grounded in their faith to speak out. They speak out for public school teachers who pour out their hearts and countless hours into educating your children! They speak out for inmates on death row who have lost the right to appeal a verdict based on racial bias! They speak out of concern that the voting rights of young people and minorities are being curtailed, diminished!

We often talk about inviting Jesus into the public square as if he were our guest, as if he should fit within the confines of what makes us comfortable. But Jesus is not simply our guest. If you keep reading, Jesus eats and drinks his way through the Gospel of Luke and never seems to return the favor. He even feeds the five thousand with someone else’s lunch! But it turns out in the end that Jesus is not just some perpetual moocher of other folks’ food. He is our host. He is walking around, visiting homes and crowds, gathering guests for a different kind of meal. He invites us into a banquet that is grounded in justice and equality for all peoples.

And this alternative world is not a place where Jesus builds up walls to separate us from each other. Jesus’ life and ministry were all about tearing walls down: the injustice that separates us from brothers and sisters, even the sin and death that separates us from God. The resurrection life that he offers us is not just for individuals. The resurrection is for a community that has come to life through peace, justice, and mercy toward one another.

Being a guest of Jesus is a humbling thing; it calls us out into a sometimes uncomfortable life of seeking justice. Life with Jesus forces us to look at our neighbors, no matter how different they might be, and never, ever regard them as nobodies. Black and white, rich and poor, they are always our equals because, for all the things that make us different, what we have in common is that we are loved by Jesus. And today he has invited everyone to this table, to sit at his banquet, even you and me. Amen.