

March 10, 2024

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Luke 14:1, 12-14 & Deuteronomy 15: 7-10

Serving by Sharing

We are continuing our sermon series featuring the feeding stories in the Gospel of Luke – stories that speak to our hunger for food, for companionship, and for the presence of God. Stories about how we interact at the table – who we will invite, who we will serve, how we will share our resources.

Our New Testament passage this morning comes a little over half-way through the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has concluded his ministry in Galilee and has turned towards Jerusalem. The journey to Jerusalem is a teaching time for Jesus – teaching the disciples and the crowds who follow him. He teaches about what it means to be his disciple, the costs involved and the likelihood of persecution. Jesus teaches about prayer, about where our treasures lie, about repenting for our sins. In chapters 13 -15 Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God using a variety of parables and stories. Our scripture this morning comes from this section of Luke's Gospel. We hear the set-up of the story in Luke 14, verse 1, followed by the challenge to the religious leaders in verses 12-14. Hear now the Word of God for the people of God:

Luke 14: 1, 12-14

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.

Jesus said to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters 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." **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent and the fourth Sunday we have heard a feeding story from Luke's Gospel. On the first Sunday we heard of the miraculous feeding of the crowd of more than 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, with food leftover to share. This story is unique among the scriptures we will hear this Lenten season, for it mentions the food which those gathered shared in some detail. The remaining scriptures we are considering this Lenten season, including the one we will hear next week, make little mention of the food consumed. There may be mention of bread and wine, but aside from that, Jesus tells the stories of these great feasts – these banquets – with something besides the food taking center stage.

Matthew Croasmun and Miroslav Volf in the *Hunger for Home* note how remarkably different Jesus' stories of eating are compared to the gastronomic adventures we see portrayed in the media or the way we often talk about meals. They say, "It's striking what Jesus notes about the many meals he eats in Luke... We fastidiously document the food, creating social media posts of beautifully plated courses. We eagerly share with one another news of a great food truck, supermarket find, or recipe." Croasmun and Volf continue, "However as a meal fades further from memory, an interesting shift takes place. When we regale one another with stories of great meals, we may describe the food, but we may say just as much about the moment, the setting, and perhaps most of all, the people present to share it with us. Jesus begins where we finish, and he does so with a richer set of concerns born of richer aspirations."¹

I think about just what Jesus' concerns were: Jesus was concerned more about who was at the table and how they got there than he was about what was actually served. Jesus was not concerned, like so many of us in the world are, about reciprocity. About whether those who were invited could repay the invitation by inviting us in return for a meal equal to what we had offered.

I think about those meals in my life where strong memories were formed. Meals that when I remember them, a smile sneaks across my face without me even realizing it. And they are, more often than not, meals that I in no way could reciprocate or repay.

I think to back to experiences Brian and I had a number of years ago when we were visiting some newly discovered relatives in northern Italy. They cooked feast after feast for us, pairing wines from the village for each course. And because their English was only a little more extensive than our Italian, we found ourselves challenged when they would keep filling our plates after we had finished. I couldn't remember the word for "enough" in Italian, but I remembered my college Spanish, so I gave that a try – and when I said "basta pasta," they laughed and understood.

We later learned that clearing the plate meant we wanted more, so we needed to leave something on the plate when we were done. But since that time "basta pasta" has become a shorthand for Brian and I when we have had enough – and not just enough food – but when we have hammered a discussion beyond any meaningful resolution, or when I need to escape from frenzied work and need some down time– whenever we have the recognition that we are full – we are over full and we are going to burst unless we stop, the "basta pasta" comes out.

¹ Matt Croasmun and Miroslav Volf *The Hunger for Home: Food & Meals in the Gospel of Luke*. 2022. Baylor University Press, p62.

And more than that, “basta pasta” is a reminder to me. It is a reminder of the act of serving with no expectation of being repaid, of giving liberally and ungrudgingly to strangers you just met. This is the Gospel that Jesus preached. This is gospel that Jesus expected the Pharisees as religious leaders to already understand. For this mirrors what the Hebrew scriptures share – the scriptures that religious leaders of Jesus’ day would have studied and internalized. Hear these words from book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15:

“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake (Deuteronomy 15:7-10)

Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so. Do not expect to be repaid. Open your hand, willingly. Serve with no expectation of reciprocity. This tenet is at the heart of the Hebrew scripture. It is the spirit of the Gospel – of the good news that Jesus shares.

And it is also part of the understanding of Ramadan in the Muslim faith. Last Monday night I had the opportunity to attend the 16th Annual Mayor’s Ramadan Dinner, where Imam Sohail Choudary spoke about the practices of Ramadan – a month of fasting, prayer, reflection and community. Ramadan begins tomorrow night. The fasting practices in Ramadan emphasize sacrifice and compassion. Ramadan teaches empathy for those where fasting is not a choice, for those who deal each day with food insecurity. The community gathers to break the fast at the end of each day and at the end of the season. The great banquets and feasts are as much about being in community and serving each other, as they are about the actual meal eaten.

Across the three monotheistic religions we see an emphasis on acts of service – on acts of sharing without any expectation of reciprocity. Jesus said to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters 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.”

What will be this blessing? As we hear from Professor Yolanda Pierce ... we will be blessed by the presence of God. She says, “Before the creation of an ecclesial organizational structure that includes pastor and laity, or pulpit and pew, God regularly showed up during a

simple meal being shared in someone's home, where believers gathered in expectation of God's holy presence.²

God shows up. God shows up in the smiles and the hugs; God shows up in the kids wriggling joyfully on the floor; God shows up in the hard conversations about illness and finances and loneliness and addiction. God shows up when we serve each other. When we use our gifts – the gifts we have received from God – to make the kingdom here on earth a little bit closer to the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom Jesus speaks so passionately about in this section of the Gospel of Luke. A kingdom not governed by human hierarchy, birthright or achievement. Rather a kingdom where humility and service frame our interactions. And God shows up.

This morning we will ordain and/or install a new class of church officers – elders and deacons who will serve as spiritual leaders of our congregation for the next three years. “Deacons are called to lead the congregation in compassion, witness, and service, representing the ministry of the church in the world and the presence of the world in the church. Elders are called to nurture the common life of the people of God through their gifts of discernment and governance.”³ In ordination and installation deacons and elders are set apart for this work.

Yet it is not just church officers who are called to serve. In the reformed tradition to which Presbyterians subscribe, we are a priesthood of all believers. God pours out the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon each Christian in Baptism. As the PC(USA) Book of Order shares, “The gifts of the Holy Spirit, given with and through Baptism, equip and strengthen us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.”⁴

We are all called to serve. We have all been given gifts. In a devotional this week from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Potawatomi botanist, reminds us the importance of sharing of our gifts. Referencing practices of indigenous populations, she says, “Many indigenous peoples share the understanding that we are each endowed with a particular gift, a unique ability.... It is understood that these gifts have a dual nature, though: a gift is also a responsibility. If the bird's gift is song, then it has a responsibility to greet the day with music. It is the duty of birds to sing and the rest of us receive the song as a gift.”⁵

This is type of reciprocity to which we are called. To share our gifts and to receive the gifts of others. To remember that Jesus' stories of banquets and feasts were not about Instagram worthy gastronomic masterpieces. Sometimes the food was never mentioned. Instead these

² Yolanda Pierce. Showing up for church when I don't want to. *Christian Century*. March 2024; online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/showing-church-when-i-don-t-want?>

³ W-2.0302 and W-2.0303 *PC(USA) Book of Order*, 2019-2023 edition. Office of the General Assembly, 2019.

⁴ W-3.0402 *PC(USA) Book of Order*, 2019-2023 edition. Office of the General Assembly, 2019.

⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer. A Pattern of Reciprocity. Center for Action and Contemplation Thursday, March 7, 2024; <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-pattern-of-reciprocity/>

stories are about our hunger to be known and loved and accepted for who we are, not what we can give back or our place in the societal hierarchy. And the good news of the Gospel is that we are known and loved; that in life and in death and in life after death, we belong to God. Now our challenge is to live as a people who are loved and claimed by the one who invites us, no matter what our circumstances are to feast with him. Join me in prayer.