

September 1, 2019

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Seats at the Table”

There is always room for one more. That’s how God sees it. When we think of life as a banquet the world’s point of view is not the same as God’s. The world says, “There’s only so much food to go around. We can’t slice the roast beef any thinner or water down the wine any more.” The world says, “We’ve planned for those we’ve invited and we’ve got to stick to the plan.” The world says, “Our guest list is about quality not quantity. The table is set. Period.” This is not how God sees it. God says, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden...” (Matt. 11:28) God says, “There is no limit to the goodness and grace I’m serving up today.” God says, “The table is spread and it reaches far and wide. At my banquet,” says God, “there is always room for one more.” This means there is a place for us at God’s table. And, the good news is, there’s room for the others, too, even those who are different from us, those whose ways and experience push against our assumptions about who should be included. You see, there’s always room for one more. There is a seat at God’s table for us and for them. Now, there are all manner of conflict and commentary in the world that would suggest otherwise but this is the good news. There is a seat at God’s table for us and for them.

The man’s name was Larry, the same as mine but that’s where the similarity ended. He was a convicted felon and having served his time was released from prison into the community of the church where my dad was the pastor. I was in high school at the time and not always tuned into what the church was doing but the ministry of the congregation to support those coming out of prison got my attention. I noticed because my family took a special interest in Larry, inviting him to our house and providing supplies to help get him started in his new life. When I grew up, Sunday dinner was a tradition. It was the midday meal and always after church, and it was more than just sandwiches and a bag of chips. My dad grew up in a family where Sunday dinner was a big deal and we kept that going, eating in the dining room on Sunday afternoon with serving bowls of side dishes and usually a roast or some other significant main course. We’d use the china and goblets, and our family of five always sat in the same places, not assigned seats but we all understood where we were to sit. This was a weekly tradition, more formal than any other time of the week. I always knew what to expect at Sunday dinner but that changed the day Larry came to the table. He looked rough. He talked rough. His experience growing up was the complete opposite of mine. He and I shared nothing in common, except that day we shared a meal. I don’t remember anything about the food we ate but I will never forget the challenging feeling in the pit of my stomach. Sunday dinner was our thing. This was our family tradition. Well, the five of us became six of us, and what was a familiar and comfortable experience had an edge to it that day. It took me awhile, growing into my adult life, to recognize what had happened that day. Our family served up more than just meat and potatoes. We offered Larry an opportunity. We created a place for him to connect. The experience gave him a chance. Because of the decisions my dad and that congregation were making, Larry could experience the change God was working in his life. God was changing us, too.

It so happens that table fellowship was important to the mission of Jesus. He often got into trouble at the table because that’s where he pointed to how God was breaking into the reality of the world. There was the day a questionable woman fell at his feet by the table and spilled oil all over the place. There was the time Jesus took bread and shared fish and fed thousands with a meager supply. The religious authorities constantly complained that he ate and drank with sinners, and on the last night of his life he sat at the table saying that every time we break bread and drink from the cup we should remember him. In our story for today Jesus is, once more, at a table. He was at the home of a Pharisee, which continued his constant push back against the religious assumptions of his day, assumptions that set limits on who should be included. Everytime the line was drawn about who is in and who is out, Jesus extended the boundary and set one more place at the table. That day at the Pharisee’s dinner table, Jesus made it clear who should be invited. He said, invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” (Luke 14:13) I imagine everyone at that dinner called to mind a face or name of someone in their community that fit those descriptions. These are the folks to invite. Jesus said, because they are never on anyone’s guest list. No table ever sets a place for them but Jesus said in God’s eyes they had a seat and it was the job of those who prepared the meal to keep finding ways to make room for one more.

The church is always at its most faithful when it drops its concern about who’s not invited and more focused on making room for others at the table. It’s in that spirit that our congregation’s ministry called “All In” is offering the Re-entry Simulation we’ve been publicizing. I call you attention, again, to the experience being planned for Sunday afternoon, September 22nd. ([Register for the Re-entry Simulation 9/22](#)) Those who participate will learn about the challenges faced by those leaving prison and re-entering society. It just may be that you can put a name or face or family to that challenging situation. Those who participate will have the opportunity to learn about ways to

respond that can make room at the table for those often forgotten or those already labeled by the world as too far gone to be included. The article in our Trifold gives you more information, including how to register for the event. Is God calling you to give it a try? Are you being called or challenged by the invitation to be "All In"? I invite us to be in prayer about this because Jesus challenges the assumptions we make about others, especially when those judgements decide who should not be included. There's room for one more and with Christ in our lives we are called to the work of setting another place at the table.

It's possible that when we gather for worship on Sundays our minds drift to think about when, where or what we're going to eat next. That's OK, especially when being at a table, any table, invites us to recall that Jesus said every time we break bread and drink the cup we are to remember him. We will remember Christ, won't we? We'll remember Christ when we sit in our pew, when we sit down for lunch, when we react to what's happening in the world, and when we wonder if a person like that has a place with us. There's always room for one more. Our job is to keep that good news as true good news for everyone.