

Sunday, August 28, 2022

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Full disclosure – I’ve always found our texts for today to be (1) incredibly easy to understand. It’s easy for us to get the message, so to speak, and (2) our texts before us today seem to be ones that are difficult to put into action as we look at our own lives.

At first glance, our texts, minus the Psalm, can tend to make us feel and believe we are not doing all we are called to do as modern-day followers of Christ.

And truthfully, it’s difficult for us to put ourselves in situations where we would sit at the head of any table uninvited. It’s difficult for us to envision a time when we prepare a feast and invite folks we don’t know to dine with us.

For me the saving grace is our Psalm, Psalm 112. It certainly adds an upbeat tone compared to the other texts.

But to be sure – all our readings today bombard us with good advice.

From Hebrews there is a long list: show hospitality to strangers, remember the imprisoned and tortured, honor marriages, don’t obsess about money, and of course, share what you have.

Our Proverbs text warns us all against acting like we are more important than we really are.

Luke’s gospel text adds to this mountain of advice. Jesus urges us to do some soul-searching and ask ourselves what really motivates our invitations and our outward-seeming generosity. Just how often do we give in hope that we will get something in return?

Good advice is before us today for sure. But how often do we ignore this good advice when we fail to welcome a visitor to our church, when we forget to honor someone else’s marriage because desire overwhelms us; when we obsess about how little money we have, and give less than what could strictly be called a tithe; when we strive for humility and realize at that very moment, we are deep in the sin of pride; or when we forget to pray or even think about the imprisoned and the tortured, though there are more of them than we can count?

We would certainly be correct if we were to view all of this good advice today as “law.” That is, something that we understand God is calling us to do as faithful followers.

However, along with the law comes grace; along with the law comes the gospel, the good news. So, where is the gospel? How is God at work, heaping grace on the banquet table? Where, do we find God’s grace pushing out of these law-packed passages?

As we study the parables of Jesus, we find they aren’t simply guides to good manners. Jesus is calling into question the very ways we have been taught to be “good” guests or hosts. Jesus is the living example of a very bad guest, publicly attacking his hosts, and offering advice we all

want to forget: invite the last people we'd think of to our tables - those who can do nothing for us in return.

Although Jesus is not a good guest, we pray time and time again – Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest over spaghetti or hot dogs or salad. And why? If Jesus would be our guest, then we could step down from all our failed attempts to do the right thing, to hold it all together, or to save our little corner of the world. We could step down, because when Jesus joins us at table, he becomes the host.

This is truly who our God is – the host, not only of the holy meal, Holy Communion, we share each Sunday morning, but of all our meals, gracing us always with food, companionship, our very lives.

And what's more is that Jesus is then somehow both guest and host but doesn't know what it is to be either. In the meal, Jesus was no more than a stranger, betrayed and abandoned, a prisoner whose last invitation was to torture and death on a cross.

So, there really is a great deal to digest as we take a serious look at our texts today.

Hearing good advice from Hebrews and Luke and seeing that good advice as the law, where do we go, how best should we respond?

I keep mentioning that when Jesus walked on earth – he was counter-cultural. And I also keep mentioning that his ways – that we profess to follow today – are just as counter-cultural. Jesus' ways, in many respects, simply do not and cannot mesh with society around us.

And therein lies the difficult part. It's not easy countering much of what is assured to be the normal we all appreciate and live with.

Over the centuries the church has been instrumental in tending to those in need – those who society tends to cast aside, those who are forever on the outside looking in.

The church has been the moving force for generations when it comes to establishing health care, education, food, clothing and shelter. The church saw the need as Jesus would have seen and it began ministries that have endured too today. The church does all it does because the need is great, and it is able to help without seeking anything in return.

Certainly, other organizations created opportunities to serve others who cannot pay or repay.

Nike has trademarked the slogan “Just do it,” but the church and others have been about doing just that since the time of Christ.

Inviting strangers to our bountiful dining table may be a great metaphor for us all as we look to the future.

Many congregations today, especially following Covid are “on the bubble,” That is they are in a very tenuous situation as they try to project what the near future holds.

Some assume that absent members will return. Some might assume that when things are back to normal more and more people will come to faith and attendance and memberships will rise. Some might assume that calling a new, vibrant, young dynamic pastor will somehow cause people to flock to the pews.

All are assumptions. Some may be right on, but then again none may ultimately materialize.

Yet, using the good advice, the law, we find in Luke today how we might think outside the box, how we might take leaps of faith and attempt to establish new ways of bringing the church to those who are our neighbors.

An example. I recently read an article entitled, "When the Table is Central to Mission." It is the story of JD Larson and his wife, Christian Ann. They are co-pastors at North City Church in Minneapolis, MN. The church began in 2019, pre-Covid. By the spring of 2021, they realized they weren't really reaching people with what they were doing. JD pointed out that "about 25-30% of the gospel happens in the context of the table. I believe Jesus was trying to shift from the temple to the table and empowering others to be temples of the Holy Spirit."

The end result was they became a dinner church. To start – every other week at a park they had dinner church, and the off weeks they had "micro church," or community groups to bring people together during the pandemic.

Their mission is – "To love our neighbors in the way of Jesus by creating spaces where neighbors become friends and get invited into the family of God."

Dinner church doesn't have a sermon or corporate singing. It has a Jesus story followed by Listening Time. They do this at 5 pm and are outside as weather permits. And they are evolving all the time -becoming what God would have them become.

Their journey seems to be one way of expressing the good advice Jesus gives us in our gospel text today.

Perhaps this example will cause us to rethink our perceptions of Table and how it might impact our ministry – individually and corporately.

Jesus the guest and the host and Crucified One, is the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus promises to hold us as we try, however imperfectly, to be hosts who make our tables even wider, and guests who are not afraid to receive what is unfamiliar and strange. And when we are neither host nor guest, when we feel like strangers or prisoners, unable to give or receive, Jesus, the one who will never leave or forsake us meets us there.

Thanks be to God. Amen