



God's Guest List

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 1, 2019*

Sirach 10:12-18

Pride begins with our stubbornness, in a turning of our heart from our Creator; it begins through people's sin, and runs its course to their utter depravity. God's response is to send new and crushing afflictions, to bring on their complete ruination. YHWH brings down arrogant leaders and establishes humble people in their place. God plucks up the arrogant by the roots and puts the lowly in their place: God cuts down their tree, leaving only a stump, then digs out the stump, roots and all. God sweeps away every trace that they lived, and erases their memory from the earth. Pride was not part of the Maker's plan for humankind; nor boiling rage for those born of woman.

Psalm 112

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Alleluia! Happy are they who fear God, *
and have great delight in the commandments! | 7 the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance. |
| 2 Their descendants will be mighty in the land; *
the generation of the upright will be blest. | 8 They will not be afraid of any evil rumors; *
their heart is right; they put their trust in God. |
| 3 Wealth and riches will be in their house, *
and their righteousness will last for ever. | 9 Their heart is established and will not shrink, *
until they see their desire upon their enemies. |
| 4 Light shines in the darkness for the upright; *
the righteous are merciful and full of compassion. | 10 They have given freely to the poor, *
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;
they will hold up their head with honor. |
| 5 It is good for them to be generous in lending *
and to manage their affairs with justice. | 11 The wicked will see it and be angry;
they will gnash their teeth and pine away; *
the desires of the wicked will perish. |
| 6 For they will never be shaken; * | |

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Continue to love each other as sisters and brothers. Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Keep in mind those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. And be mindful of those who are being treated badly, since you know what they are enduring. Let marriage be honored by everyone, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge covenant breakers and adulterers. Put the love of money out of your lives and be content with what you have, for God has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Thus we may say with confidence, "God is my Helper, and I will not be afraid; what can mere humans do to me?" Remember your leaders, who preached the Word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. Through Jesus let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise—that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge God's Name. Keep doing good works and sharing your resources. These are the sacrifices that please God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

One Sabbath, when Jesus came to eat a meal in the house of one of the leading Pharisees, the guests watched him closely. Jesus went on to address a parable to the guests, noticing how they were trying to get a place of honor at the table. "When you're invited to a wedding party, don't sit in the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished has been invited. Otherwise the hosts might come and say to you, 'Make room for this person,' and you would have to proceed shamefacedly to the lowest place. What you should do is go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your hosts approach you they'll say, 'My friend, come up higher.' This will win you the esteem of the other guests. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Then Jesus said to the host, "Whenever you give a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends or colleagues or relatives or wealthy neighbors. They might invite you in return and thus repay you. No, when you have a reception, invite those who are poor or have physical infirmities or are blind. You should be pleased that they can't repay you, for you'll be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

When it comes right down to it, I have a strong suspicion that few of us would really enjoy being guests at a dinner party hosted by God.

You see, if God was hosting a dinner party, God would be sure to invite all the people we would never have considered inviting. Not out of malice toward us, of course, but simply because God has the capacity to enjoy, to delight in, the people we find most unappetizing. In all likelihood, at a dinner party hosted by God, we would end up seated at a table with an awkward—even uneasy—collection of personalities and bodies. Because God's guest list would inevitably end up putting us in close proximity with those who irritate, agitate, exasperate, or otherwise vex us.

I can just see it. Can you? I imagine God rubbing God's incorporeal hands together with delight and anticipation, so anxious and excited about what might transpire at these tables. So hopeful that maybe, just maybe, some kind of healing might bubble up between the bites and the sips, between the meandering stories and the polite chuckles, between the laughter and the tears of babies and children. God would be so hopeful that putting us at tables together even just for an evening might begin to mend some rift, bridge some gap, suture some wound that lies between us. Because we **are** wounded, aren't we? So very wounded. And our wounds keep us apart, keep us distant. We have such long lists of people with whom we wouldn't want to share a meal. And it can be difficult for us to understand, why it might be worth getting over this discomfort. Difficult to understand why God has so much invested in us eating with people we don't like very much and who might not really like us, either.

So what *is* God up to with all this table talk, with all this fussing about seating charts and guest lists, with all this meddling with our meals?

You'll often hear a certain kind of Christian proclaim with great assurance that "Jesus saves." Episcopalians tend to be a bit uncomfortable with this kind of language and with the theology it often implies. Nevertheless, it raises an important question: if Jesus came to save us, what is it that we need to be saved from?

One of the most important things Jesus is trying to save us from, at least in my mind, is our human impulse to divide, to exclude, and to segregate. Our tendency to see ourselves as somehow separate, different, above or below the rest of humanity. Jesus is trying to get us re-connected with all the people who scare us, intimidate us, offend us, disgust us. With those whose raw, blatant need makes us want to look away. With those who wish us ill...and even those who hate us. As well as those we hate.

And, as we hear in our Gospel text today, and in so many other texts: one of Jesus' primary tools for re-connection is the meal, the table.

Our table right here in church, of course. There's a reason we do this every week. A reason we remember, and remember, and remember again. But also our tables at home. As well as the many, many tables we occupy in the world.

You see: God's purpose, God's primary purpose in coming among us in Jesus, is a thing that churchy people often call reconciliation. Indeed, God wants nothing less than a world in which we are no longer exiles, or strangers, or enemies; a world in which we learn to call the most unexpected people our mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers; a world in which our sense of belonging and love grows exponentially, witnessing to the power of God's peacemaking, God's shalom.

You see, God has big dreams. Big dreams for the new kind of family we could be. Big dreams for the reconciliation of everything—nothing less than all of humankind...all of creation... reconciled.

Reconciliation. It sounds like a big project, yes. A big, impractical, naively idealistic project. A project most of us wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole. A project we simply don't have time or energy to take very seriously. Yet God has never stopped nudging this dream into humanity's view. Because it's God's wildest and best dream.

As big and audacious as this dream may seem, however, God's dreams aren't meant to burden us with longer and more overwhelming to-do lists.

Rather, God's dreams are meant to liberate our hearts and minds from their attachment to the "world as it is" and give us the gift of new vision. Vision for what *could be* if we were willing to risk reconciliation. Liberated and liberating vision.

It's hard, though. Reconciliation is a word so multi-syllabic that it can't help but sound burdensome. And so many of us are feeling burnt out these days. Burnt out by the feeling that we're never doing enough; burnt out by

the worry that we're just standing by as the world goes to hell in a handbasket; burnt out by guilt that we aren't trying harder to advance God's reign of peace and justice.

Yet just when we least expect it, just when we're feeling most wrapped up in the burnout and exhaustion of our lives, Jesus speaks this balm to us:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Of course, there's a part of each one of us, it seems, that can't really hear these words, that isn't quite able to absorb this message. We think we don't really have time for rest. We think that we must charge onward, keep on fighting the good fight.

Yet in God's economy, in God's alternative economy, rest is for everyone. Sabbath is for all of creation. Sabbath is, in fact, a commandment. Because when we learn to give ourselves a break, God dares to hope that we might find the compassion to give others a break, too. To give creation a break. To re-orient our fundamental relationship to people and to things. To remember that we are meant to "love people, not things" and to "use things, not people."

So what if? What if even in the midst of the upheaval of our world, what if amidst all of the pain and suffering and strife, what if Jesus' invitation still stands firm? What if we are still being invited to come and rest? To eat, and talk, and read, and stroll, and nap?

God needs us to become Sabbath-keeping people. Because when we are at rest, when we release our striving and conniving, our minds and hearts become fertile soil for new vision for new possibility for new life.

At rest, when we're not trying to win, or accumulate, or prove anything, we find ourselves dreaming of a different world. A world in which different things matter.

A world in which how well we live together is the only real form of security and the only real form of wealth.

At rest, reconciliation becomes an almost inevitable dream. Because we dream of a world where we are at ease with one another, where we can trust one another, where we look out for one another. We yearn for such a world. God yearns for such a world.

And where better to begin enflashing this dream than around a table, over a meal?

Of course, God has been inviting us to the table from the very beginning. Putting out the bread and the wine. Lighting the candles. Hoping we'll come and sit a spell, welcome others to join us, and pull up extra chairs as word spreads. Hoping someone will eventually break the bread, tearing off hunks for everyone, and passing them around. Hoping someone will uncork the wine, splashing some into each glass, and raising a toast. "Thank you. Thank you for everything. Thank you for this life." Thanksgiving, which, of course, is precisely what Eucharist means.

It's all right here. We do it every week. But we can forget what it is we're doing. We're having a meal. With a hundred-some people. Friends, strangers, enemies. People we'd never think of inviting to dinner. But nevertheless, here we are, preparing to eat together. Sharing the same bread, the same wine. The conversation, of course, is ritualized, scripted...but it's all here, all the parts that really matter. Confession. Forgiveness. Peace. Week after week. Here is my body. Here is my blood. For you.

It's all here in the liturgy, this script we read to one another each week. Liturgy, which means "the work of the people." Liturgy, which is labor. A consummate labor of love...to air these words out every Sunday, letting them breathe... to find ourselves in these words, and to let them work on us, work in us.

This work that shepherds us into rest; this rest that inspires thanksgiving; this thanksgiving that spreads a table; this table that makes us a people: God's people.

This table, you see, sets all of the other tables of our lives. This table initiates us into a pattern of life. A pattern of healing and reconciliation. It all begins at the table. Where we get a taste of what is possible. A taste of God's dream. A taste of the heavenly banquet.

And soon enough, we're inviting everyone to dinner. Finally. Home. Together. Friend, Stranger, Enemy. With amazement that we're all around the table, we raise our glasses, saying: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Because around this table, a whole new world is beginning.

May it be so.

Amen.