

Ottawa Mennonite Church

Sermon: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

October 12, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14

I heard a story earlier this week, it was about a small group which met for a while in this congregation. It was called Guess Who's Coming to dinner. From what I gathered people would sign up as hosts and some would sign up as guests. The coordinators would



randomly connect guests to hosts. Hosts then would not know who was coming to dinner but they did know that there would be so many guests and that the guests would be bringing something to augment the meal, whether it was a salad or dessert. From what I gathered the meal was a surprise as much as the guests were surprises.

This weekend being thanksgiving, no doubt you too are gathering around a table of sorts, however neither the guests nor the meal will be a surprise. No doubt a carefully prepared turkey will grace the table, with all of the fixings. Succulent stuffing, creamy mashed potatoes, hot gravy flowing over all like a beverage. Hungry yet? A variety of vegetables will appear, corn, carrots, parsnips, perhaps turnip, some preserves might be pulled out of the cold cellar. Dessert will no doubt be a carefully crafted pumpkin pie, baked to perfection and served with a gluttonous dollop of whipped cream.

The family and friends will gather, a grace of thanksgiving will be said, and then all chaos breaks out as dishes are passed, and food gluttonously piled onto plates and is barbarically shoveled into mouths. At least that is how it is at my house. I am sure many of you here can remember similar types of family gatherings.

Beyond the differences in date, thanksgiving is a traditional holiday uniquely celebrated in North America. It is a time and opportunity to reflect on the the harvest and to give thanks to God the creator and sustainer of life. We thank God for the blessings of the past year, for the bounty of the harvest, for health, and for a whole litany of other things, keeping in mind that others both far away and locally are not nearly as fortunate as we are. As such it is also a time to share our blessings with those less privileged. Food banks have special food drives, fundraisers start to provide clothing for those in need, and shelters prepare their own thanksgiving banquets.

THE WEDDING BANQUET

In the gospel reading this morning we are treated to a different kind of banquet. The parable here comes at the end of a series of three describing the kingdom of God. The first being a parable describing two sons and their obedience to their father. The second being last week's parable, the parable of the wicket tenants and this morning's, the parable of the wedding banquet.

This parable, like others in Matthew, parallels a parable found in the gospel of Luke, the parable of the banquet, surprisingly enough. There are notable differences though, for instance, in Luke's gospel it is simply a banquet, in ours it is a wedding banquet. In Luke's there is no king, instead the host is left ambiguous. In the Matthew passage a significant difference to take note of is who is invited and the treatment of the servants.

Originally invited to the banquet are probably a number of nobles, or at the very least members of the upper class, and, as we know, they turn down the invitation. In our Matthean text the servant is told to invite both the good and the bad, but only after those who rejected the king's original invitation were destroyed. Matthew is much more pre-occupied with judgement.

In Luke's version there is no judgement or retaliation, but instead the homeowner tells the servant to invite "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"¹ this should come as no surprise though, for Luke the good news is for the outsider. It is for the social outcast, it is those who live on the fringes of society.

This parable does represent a very interesting allegory for the kingdom of God. The wedding banquet imagery here is not unusual for Jesus to use. He uses bride and bride-groom language frequently when talking about the coming kingdom of God. The servants this morning which parallel the servants in the previous parable, the wicket tenants, are allegories for the prophets sent to the people of Israel. The people of Israel, the Jews, were the ones originally invited, but excuses were made. A professor of mine once said that the story of the Bible is the story of God's people missing the point. Turning down an invitation such as this could be argued as missing the point.

¹ Luke 14:21

However, what I think stands out is who is present at the banquet. After having all of his guests RSVP in the negative the slaves were sent out to gather “both the good and the bad.” One might imagine these slaves, or servants to be the apostles, and the good and the bad? That’s us. We are the ones on the fringes, we are the ones who have erred, we are the undesireables, we are the ones who were not invited, but we are the ones who are welcome at the banquet, because those who were invited missed the point.

From previous experience with scripture we know that the kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom, or at least that is how people like to talk about it. It is not those who are originally invited who get to enjoy the feast prepared for them, but it is instead those who were gathered up from the street. Much like other instances of the upside-down kingdom motif.

Jesus said that in his kingdom the first will be last and the last will be first (Matt. 20:16).

He said that whoever wanted to be great would have to be a servant (Matt. 20: 26).

Faith like a child is required to enter into the kingdom.

Or you must have faith like a mustard seed.

The apostle Paul said that God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, that he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27).

According to Paul, Jesus was equal to God, and then he emptied himself and made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant (Phil. 2:6-11).

Jesus was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that through his poverty we would become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

How should this be any different? When God opened up the banquet to everyone, God offered hospitality to all. Through Christ’s passion and resurrection, the power of death was defeated and we all were invited to the banquet. We all were invited to the feast. We all were invited to participate in the kingdom of God. I see this parable not just about who is a part of the kingdom, but I see it as an example of hospitality.

Hospitality at first appears to be a simple and easy concept. Either have someone over for a meal, or offer a bed to someone in need. Or invite someone into your home to share time with them. On the surface it seems like a simple thing to do but it is far deeper than that, and has a very lasting impact on those who receive your hospitality and sometimes it even changes you.

When I was in grade school, one night my best friend came over for a sleep over, in the middle of the week. This at time was very neat and exciting for me, my best friend coming over for a sleep over. For one reason or another my Mom stayed home from work for next little while, I didn't have to go to school, all and all it seemed like a pretty good time, there were some odd things that happened, my friends two brothers and his mother stayed with us too. What I didn't know at the time was that there was a lot of problems in that family.

The evening started when my parents received a phone call from my friends mother. Her and her husband were going through a seperation and she was feeling threatened by him, she didn't feel that she was safe at her home anymore and she couldn't think of what to do. My parents only hearing her side of the story but also realizing that something was going on, simply opened the door and let her and her children in. There was a little concern that something might happen to us, but that fear was outweighed by the need that they saw in my friends family. My parents didn't ask questions, they simply opened the door, gave them water, gave them a safe place to stay and gave them food. It was a simple act of hospitality to someone in need, that had both a lasting impact on that family, but also on our own. The time we spent giving my friends family a place to stay has left an indellible impact on our lives. My parents modeled for me what it was to open your home to someone in need. While we don't know where that family is now, we have received phone calls from them perodically and know enough to know that they are alright.

I believe that hospitality is a challenging notion for us today. With increased security, increased fears, and a general sense of privacy, opening your home is a counter cultural act. It sets us apart as different from the rest of North America. Sure entertaining is fun, but that is more about showing off than it is about providing hospitality. When we entertain, we make the best food that we can, we have our house spotless and organized perfectly, we use the best cutlery and dishes, we serve our very best. But when one provides hospitality, the food is how it is, the dishes are what they are, the house is in whatever disarray it usually is in. Hospitality does not require us to be prepared ahead of time. Hospitality requiries that you are authentic, that you are who you are. While entertaining is what the King wanted to do in

the parable, he instead became a hospitable king, opening his home to whomever was able to come, both the good and the bad. Yes, the house was prepared, but the king in all of his properness was forced to let go of it, when he invited everyone in off of the street.

HOSPITALITY IN THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Hospitality is an important theme in scripture. Christ's ministry was based upon constant hospitality. He relied on the goodness of others for a place to stay and for food to eat. Being a nomad he had no sustainable income, and his constant movement made having a home an impossibility. However, there was an uncanny way that Christ always managed to find himself at peoples homes. It was through the generosity of others that allowed Christ minister to the people. We are compelled by the author of Hebrews to "not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."² Hospitality links us to the divine. Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to three angels in Genesis reveals God's promise of a son to them. In biblical times hospitality was a way of meeting and receiving holy presence. The disciples are commanded to "take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place."³ Had the two on the Emaeus road not offered hospitality to the third, it would never have been revealed to them that it was the risen Christ.

Where thanksgiving is typically a holiday that is for close family, it is difficult to imagine hosting "strangers" but who are they? People afflicted with HIV/AIDS or TB? People who differ from us in ethnic origin, people with different religious or political affiliations, but what about the youth and young adults among us? What about the people who live next door to you? Or 5 doors down from you?

Hospitality is when we see Christ in each other, hospitality is when we see each person as our neighbour, invited to the table. Hospitality is when barriers are broken, and all become welcome. Hospitality accepts people as they are, not projecting anything on them. Hospitality allows others to be themselves in our dwelling places, around our tables. Hospitality invites the friend or the stranger, the mentally impaired, or emotionally estranged, those different in race, faith, social circumstance, or

² Hebrews 13:2

³ Mark 6:8-10

political perspective. Hospitality means giving all guests the freedom to refel themselves as they choose. Hospitality is ultimately a an expression of love. God's love. While we may look at this passage from Matthew as a 'who's in and who's out' kind of scripture, I invite you to ponder what it says about God's openness and God's hospitality during this Thanksgiving season.

I invite you, I encourage you, during this thanksgiving season, to ponder how it is that you could provide hospitality to another. It might be as simple as setting an extra place at the table, or leaving a seat open for an uninvited guest. Living in the revelation that you have felt the hospitality of God, can you extend the same hospitality to another?

~Craig Neufeld