

“A Great Dinner”

A Valley Presbyterian Church Sermon

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Isaiah 25:1-9

Luke 14:16-24

“Thanks for making a great dinner, dad.” While I heard these words being said, I wondered what was so special about the meal I had just set before my boys. But, when I looked down, I realized all of the decisions that went into that meal. *Ballpark* brand; two turkey dogs for AJ, one for Jack. Waffle fries – their favorite cut. Red grapes – seedless – one large bunch for AJ and several smaller clusters for Jack. Room was left on AJ’s plate to squeeze his own ketchup. The corn was in a separate bowl so that it would not touch any of the other food, especially the ketchup. The milk was in medium cups, bigger than the ones we use for juice, but smaller than water or Gatorade after soccer practice or riding bikes.

There are a lot of different factors that might, for each of us, make a dinner great. It begins with hunger, of course. Part of our anticipation is a physiological response to what our bodies need to function properly. It also might make a difference to us when, where and with whom the dinner will take place. Is it at a restaurant that just received a fantastic review? Do the background music and food presentation add to the ambiance? Did the invitation catch your eye because of who was throwing the party? Or, is it on Sunday afternoon when your family traditionally gathers? Is it with a group of friends that always lifts your spirits?

While for most of us blessed enough to live in this country, dinner is a daily event, only a small percentage of them are great. In the parable that Jesus tells, a certain man, a man of means, has planned an elaborate party – he presumes that it will be a great dinner – and he invites his peers to attend. At the appropriate time, a servant travels to tell those invited that everything is ready, but is met with excuses. “This practice of the double invitation allowed guests to verify that proper arrangements were being made and that the “right” people would be in attendance. If the “right” people were not going to be there, the guests had the “right” to decline.”¹

While cultural norms of the day afforded guests the opportunity to decline, the excuses they give are flimsy at best. It’s hard to believe that someone would purchase a piece of land or even livestock unseen. But, for these reasons, the first two guests ask to be excused. Since this is a parable, you might expect that the third guest might reveal a different way – like the Samaritan who helps the injured man on the road after the Priest and Levite pass him by – maybe someone would finally come to his senses and accept the invitation to the dinner party. But, this man too declines to attend, offering not an excuse but simply stating, “I have just gotten married, I cannot come.”

¹ *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. IX, “Luke-John”

Upon hearing the news, the host of the party becomes angry. The dinner will go on as planned, but with different guests. Here, we come to recognize exactly what – for the host – will constitute a great dinner. After the servants have gone out and invited the poor, crippled, blind and lame of the town, there is still room for more. The host is not yet satisfied, he wants every seat to be taken; he wants everyone to have the opportunity to come to the party.

And so, he sent the servants outside the city to the country lanes to find even more who could come. Normally, the homeless and landless lived outside the city gates (which were locked at night) in order to keep them away from the homes of the rich. Because their social ostracism was enforced, the servant may well have had to “compel” them to “come in” where they normally were not allowed. You can imagine what a hard decision it might have been for some of these folks to accept the invitation without suspicion; to attend a dinner to which they had never previously been welcomed or wanted.

And so, if we apply the metaphor of the heavenly banquet to this particular great dinner, the call to participate is universal: the master sends his servants to search up and down for people to come and fill the tables. There seems to be no concern that the food will run out, only that someone might not receive their invitation. Those who choose not to come – the ones who originally received invitations – offer excuses, but those reveal something significant about their priorities. It would appear that material possessions, work obligations, and families are more important than participation in the banquet. It could also be said that those who offer excuses fail to recognize the opportunity to have balance in their lives; they fail to see that while some things in life can wait, the food is best when it first comes to the table.

I hope that as some of you have been listening this morning – actually, my hope is that all of you are listening – but that some of you have been remembering the two great dinners that took place here last weekend. On Saturday, many of you participated in a community event – one which required a great deal of planning and participation. Many of you offered your particular gifts and skills – making, donating, inviting, scheduling, welcoming, selling, cleaning, parking, singing, stirring, serving, and barking. And still, what made it a great dinner was not solely the culinary or human ingredients, but the Spirit of commitment, welcome and invitation that Christ has infused into His Church. And while the numbers may have turned out the way the event planners hoped, it is the prayers of saints past and present which have opened the doors and sent the servants out into the unlikely places, “compelling” people to “come in” not just for spaghetti or the chance to win a quilt or a jersey, but to taste what God has made ready.

On Sunday, we gathered again in preparation to come to the Lord’s Table on World Communion Sunday. This day of worship reminds us how the Church of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of Christians spans the globe, but also how important it is for us to be those servants who search high and low to invite others to Christ. Many of those who hunger for good news feel as if they do not belong inside the city gates; that church is that last place they will be welcomed. But, as we learn in this morning’s parable, the

host will never be satisfied until every seat is filled; sending the servants to go out again to bring the people in.

Last Saturday, we witnessed what amazing things can happen, in the Spirit of community-building and fellowship, when people are invited into the House of the Lord. On Sunday, we were reminded that none of what we do could be possible apart from what God has done on our behalf; that the food we have to offer can nourish others because we have already been fed.

Writer Anna Carter Florence offers these observations; she says: “I know a lot of people—perhaps you do, too—who look about as happy to be in church as Eeyore. You would never guess, to look at them, that salvation is a good thing. You would never know, to hear them tell it, that Christ has made a difference. They show no sign that this really is a party, that we really are "being-saved," that the gospel is really and truly good news! Maybe the reason for their reserve has more to do with upbringing and custom than stinginess or sourness; maybe. Or maybe they find it hard to sit at the same table where everyone else (taxpayers, sinners, prostitutes) sits, too.”²

Maybe...but for two days last weekend, I witnessed something very different in this particular church. I did not see people who looked sleepy and sad like Eeyore, even if they had spent more time in this house than in their own house. I did not see people who were concerned about who else was sitting at the table with them. I did not see people offering excuses that they were too busy to worship or serve; or that they did not have any good gifts to give. I see a church that is beginning to emerge from a difficult time of confusion and loss; rising to meet the challenges that have been set before them and the commission that Christ has given them. It’s my privilege to say that them has become us, and that I can face these challenges alongside you.

Maybe it is fitting that last weekend’s two great dinners took place almost exactly six months after and before Easter, the celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord. In the gospels, when Jesus appeared to his followers after being brought back to life, they would recognize him as friend and Lord when bread was broken. Sitting around a table, giving thanks to God, sharing the good gifts they had received with one another, Christ entered their midst – even though Christ had always been in their midst.

Today, let us pause and offer our praise to God, saying, “Father, thanks for the great dinner.” And let us remember that, while from our point of view, a dinner can be great for a whole host of reasons, for God, the reasons are clear. Everything is prepared. Everyone is invited. No-one is excluded unless they excuse themselves. Our many and varied gifts are shared. There is great joy and celebration. And we do not rest until the table is full. AMEN.

² Anna Carter Florence, “Preaching the Lesson, Matthew 22:1-14”