

“Party Time!”
 delivered Sunday, August 29, 2010
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 Luke 14:1, 7-14

There is an old downtown Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. Its Victorian architecture used to frame a large stained glass window in the front chancel area, positioned like the one behind me here. Whereas our window depicts Jesus surrounded by a crowd and blessing the children, the window in the Dallas church showed only Jesus. Jesus alone, reaching out his arms to welcome all those who entered that sanctuary; and, beneath him, were these three words: “Come unto me...” A few years ago, when the congregation outgrew the old building and built a new one, they made a strategic decision to move that window. In its new location, instead of greeting you when you enter the sanctuary, Jesus is still standing there, his arms outstretched, saying “Come unto me...” from the back wall, over the door - as you leave the church. (1) Come unto me...into the city streets. Come unto me...into this downtown of business and enterprise, into this community of the arts and sciences, into the reality of homelessness and need. Come unto me into the world where God is about the work of redemption and restoration among a vast and diverse human family.

Neither of the two locations of that window is more important than the other; it’s just that the message rings differently from each place. From the front wall that window seemed to say, “Welcome to sacred space,” where Jesus invites us saying, “Come unto me and I will give you rest,” because he is intent on offering all of us sanctuary, protection, a refuge from all the burdens that wear us down during the week. Moving the window to the back wall, above the door, the same words shift their meaning, and “Come unto me...” invites us to join him in the world where there are simply no walls around the presence of God.

In the same way, throughout the gospels, Jesus was always gathering people into his company, and then pointing them beyond their closed circle to say the Kingdom of God is bigger than you could ever imagine. The place where Jesus has this conversation is most often around the dinner table.

The sentence that introduces our scripture this morning indicates that this particular gathering is one high stress meal. The 14th chapter of Luke begins: “On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.” That is one packed sentence! There is the day – the Sabbath – with all those rules and customs that we know Jesus is just bound to break or upset. (We heard about that last week when he healed the woman bent over with a crippled spirit on the Sabbath.) There is the occasion – a meal – that also has rules about who is welcomed at the table, and who’s not, and where certain people are supposed to sit. There is the setting – in the home of a Pharisee, in fact a *leader* of the Pharisees – who cares about all these rules and regulations and customs – more than anyone else. (It’s also important to note that Jesus not only welcomes the outcasts to the table, he dines with the establishment people too.) Then, in this one jam-packed sentence, the day, the occasion, and the setting build up to its culmination: “they were watching him closely.” (2)

They were watching Jesus closely. Maybe they were simply trying to figure him out, so widespread had the stories been shared about his miracles and teaching and healing. Maybe they were suspicious of him, so they watched him closely – the way he ate with tax collectors and

prostitutes – surely they could find some chargeable offense and entrap him. Maybe, just maybe, they wanted to know him better. And they were watching him closely, as you might try to size up a new in-law, or in the way you wonder whether someone you just met could turn out to be a friend, or how you try to discern if you can see in another person what others have come to see. Jesus obviously knew that he was being closely watched, they were trying to position themselves so they could sit as near to him as possible.

So he answers their musings about himself by telling a parable about a similar kind of gathering, a meal to which people are invited. Because it's a parable, we can safely assume there are layers of meaning in it. At one level, it's a counter-cultural, turn the social customs on their head kind of story. Don't worry about where your place card is on the table when you are a guest, and when you give a party...invite not just your friends and prestigious people, but rather the most unlikely, the most unexpected, and share the gifts of life with those in greatest need."

It's the same invitation you see when Jesus stands above the rear door of the church saying, "Come unto me," as you go out into the world. On an even deeper level, the parable transcends what we can ever do, or even imagine. It's about being welcomed into the Kingdom of God. It's Jesus from the front wall of the sanctuary promising every single one of us the gift of blessed rest, a position of unmerited honor, a place at his table. As New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright observes, "If Jesus' vision of the Christian life, from one point of view is a journey, from another point of view – it's a party." (3)

It's a party where it does not matter who you are, or what you do, or whatever your station in life. For a world which is so narrowly defined by cultural, racial, educational, social, and religious divisions, the church – in the most counter-cultural way – is a party where every single one of us is invited, and welcomed, and challenged to extend the love, grace and mercy of God to everyone we meet. If you have ever felt left out, or if you have ever felt like you did not belong, or if you have ever felt you were not good enough, then this is the party for you! In the Kingdom of God, every single person is of significance – including you, and me, and everyone we see.

Warren Bolton, one of the Editors of the State newspaper, spoke at the downtown Library last week to a group of public servants concerned about the problems of illiteracy in Columbia. He told a story about a busy father trying to be both a good parent and to balance his work demands. One Saturday, due to a deadline the father had brought home some work for the weekend, but he was constantly being interrupted by his five-year-old daughter who wanted Daddy to play with her. After a few responses to the little girl of "just as soon as I finish this" or "in just a few minutes, honey" he was looking for a better answer. As the little girl approached him asking yet one more time, "Daddy, can you play with me now?" the father eyed a magazine sitting on a nearby table, with an advertisement on the back featuring a picture of the world. The father picked up the magazine, tore off the back cover, showed it to his daughter, then tore it up into many pieces. He gave them to her saying, "you take these pieces over there and try to put the world back together again. When you're finished, we'll go outside and play. The little girl took the pieces of paper, went over and sat down on the floor and began putting together the puzzle.

In a short while, a very short while, she was back saying, "Okay Daddy, I finished, now we can go out and play." Thinking it impossible, he had counted on at least 10 or 15 minutes of time to finish his work, he looked over and saw the world all put together. "How did you do that, dear? How did you do that so fast?" he asked. "Well," she replied, "there was a picture of a man

on the other side of that sheet. The world was big and hard to do, but I figured if I could put the man together, the world would be together too.

Bolton concluded...“Isn’t that the way it is? Sometimes the world’s problems seem so big. Sometimes the future and its challenges seem almost insurmountable. But we just have to remember that if we focus on putting the person together, the world will come together too.” (4)

Friends, each one of us is put together just right by our relationship with Jesus Christ. For God so loved the world, Jesus said, “When you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...the people who cannot possibly repay you....” and we will discover that we too are welcomed to the time of our life, for in the eyes of God there is no position of honor, not inside the sanctuary, not outside in the world, except for the seat that is saved for each one of us beside Jesus Christ himself. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Ted Wardlaw, “Atlas is invited to church,” Benedictory article for *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 6/1/09.
- 2) Grateful to Kim Clayton’s fine sermon, “Table Manners,” 9/2/01 at Grace Covenant Church in Asheville, in which she breaks down this highly charged sentence.
- 3) N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*.
- 4) Grateful to my husband, Larry Arney, who attended that meeting and shared Warren Bolton’s story with me.