

Welcome

11th Sunday after Pentecost – August 15, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² He called a child, whom he put among them, ³ and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Last week, we looked at Jesus’ invitation to “repent and believe in the good news.” Today, we’ll see that this invitation plays out in a welcome that is extended to everyone; especially those we suspect might be excluded from God’s table.

In-groups and out-groups

You don’t have to spend much time around organizations of all stripes to learn that there are in-groups and out-groups, those who are part of the inner circle and those who stand on the outside looking in. Indeed, most of us have probably learned that once a person is slotted as “in” or “out,” changing that status can be nearly impossible. Surely, this is one of the darker sides of human nature.

It wasn’t any different in first-century Israel. Led by the Pharisees, many Jews labeled those whom they saw as sinful and unrighteous as the out-group. The Essenes are a good example of those who embraced exclusion in the community of God’s people.

The Essenes were a group of Jews who had withdrawn from Jerusalem to establish a community

Dinner with Jesus

In the Gospels, a lot happens around the dinner table. Jesus teaches. He performs miracles. He sparks controversy in merely choosing his dinner companions! What’s going on?

Throughout the NT, meals play a pivotal role. This isn’t too surprising given the importance of meals in the Greco-Roman (and Jewish) world of the first century. Meals were a means of creating and solidifying social bonds in a culture driven by social status. Typically, 10-15 diners would gather in a square or rectangular room. The diners would recline on benches that lined the walls so that each diner faced inward toward the others. (We can forget our mental pictures of tables and chairs!) Diners would be arranged by social rank and good hosts were adept at making such distinctions.¹

The controversies that swirled around Jesus’ meals were centered on who would eat with whom? By eating with assorted “sinners,” such as tax collectors and prostitutes, Jesus deeply offended the sensibilities of the “right-minded” Pharisees. They understood the symbolic significance of Jesus’ dinner partners.

By coupling his choice of dinner companions with his kingdom announcement, Jesus was enacting his proclamation that all would be welcome at God’s great banquet (see the pg. 2 text box). Forgiveness was to be the central characteristic of Jesus’ disciples, demonstrating that God’s kingdom was indeed dawning. There was nothing that anyone could have done that would place them beyond the reach of forgiveness. Just try to imagine the power of such forgiveness.

1. There is an excellent article on these meals in the August, 2004, issue of *Bible Review*, “Dinner with Jesus & Paul,” by Dennis Smith.

at Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.¹ Emphasizing purity, the Essenes saw themselves as the true heirs of God's promises. They viewed other devout Jews with suspicion. The Essenes sought to be truly righteous (at least in their own eyes) as they awaited the arrival of God's kingdom – an event that would surely be focused upon themselves. Like many Jews, the Essenes believed that illness and injury were a result of sin. Thus, a crippled person or a leper would be placed in the “sinners out-group” and could not hold a leadership position in the Essene

God's Banquet

In his book, *The Bible Makes Sense*,¹ Walter Brueggemann urges Christians to learn how to read the Bible as an insider. A key to this is learning to appreciate some of the most powerful biblical images, such as the image of God's banquet.

My family may be like yours; we use food to celebrate everything! It has always been this way. Even in ancient Israel, battlefield victories were marked by a great banquet. Not surprisingly then, the Old Testament prophets used the image of a great banquet that would celebrate God's final victory over evil. Because the final victory would mark the arrival of God's Messiah and God's kingdom, we sometimes refer to this celebration as God's messianic banquet.

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”
Isaiah 25:6 (NRSV)

Imagine how those words would sound to people who lived on a modest diet, with hunger never far away. Isaiah makes concrete the promise of God's kingdom. Jesus also often used the image of a wedding banquet. Such banquets are hopeful, joyful celebrations of love, relationship, and family.

In all this and more, Jesus' eating with “sinners” at the “banquets” demonstrated in stark terms that everyone would be welcome at God's celebration.

1. This is my book recommendation for August. It is a brief volume and is available now at *Inspirations*, the St. Andrew Bookstore.

community. Here is part of their community rules: “Neither the blind nor the lame, nor the deaf nor the mute, nor the lepers, nor those whose flesh is blemished, shall be admitted to the council of the community.” Lepers were shunned by the Jews for more than mere medical reasons!

A shocking welcome

When we talk about welcoming everyone to St. Andrew or to the Lord's table, it is easy to let our minds glide along the surface and miss how shocking the word “everyone” can really be. When Jesus shared a table with tax-collectors or healed the shunned lepers, he enacted a welcome that the average Jew on the street would have found most disturbing. Indeed, with the tax collector sitting next to him and the Pharisees on the outside looking in, it is as if Jesus said, “Imagine whoever you think just could not be welcome at God's table . . . well, they will be the first in the door.”

Jesus turned everything upside down. He demonstrated to everyone that the New Covenant people of God were to be shaped by neither rules-keeping nor exclusion. Rather, by extending welcome in the way that he did, Jesus demonstrated the concrete reality of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness that was to be the central characteristic of God's people. Simply put, Jesus called the Jews to a new understanding and a new way of being God's covenant people.

A welcome home

There is still more to Jesus' welcome. Jesus' fellow Jews knew that though they lived in the land of Israel, for all practical purposes, they still lived in exile under the thumb of foreign rulers. In their minds, they had labored under this exile for centuries as punishment for their sins. Now, they fervently awaited the end of this exile and the arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus' bold enactment of God's forgiveness and welcome was a claim that God's kingdom was indeed arriving and that, of course, Israel's sins were being forgiven. The exile was ending. The banquet doors were thrown wide open!

There is nothing that we can do to place ourselves beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. In turn, the welcome we extend to others must bear true forgiveness and inclusion. When we welcome others into God's house and God's family, we are welcoming them home.

¹The Dead Sea Scrolls are from the library of the Essene community. It is very possible that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, spent some time with the Essenes. It is even possible that Jesus spent time at Qumran before beginning his public ministry. There is much more to the Essenes than we can talk about here.

Daily Bible Readings

(God's expansive welcome to the banquet)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 25:6-10 A powerful image of God's banquet and our reconciliation with God. This passage will repay several slow, prayerful readings.</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 21:28-32 Jesus tells a parable about who enters the doors of God's banquet first.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding banquet. (Again with the party!) This one is pretty clear – it is the “unsavory” street people who respond to the invitation and are welcomed to the wedding.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 7:35-50 A Pharisee cannot tolerate whom it is that Jesus has welcomed to the table.</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 19:1-10 (esp. 9-10) The marriage supper of the Lamb. Marriage is a commonly used image for the relationship between God and God's people.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Fall Bible Academy brochures will be available next Sunday!!

The Fall Bible Academy session will begin the week of September 13. We will be offering the largest array of morning, afternoon, and evening classes yet. The newly redesigned Bible Academy brochure will be available beginning next Sunday at the Bible Academy's Ignition Sunday table in the Narthex. The classes include *From Resurrection to Right Now: Oh! The Places the Church Has Gone* with Rev. Kathryn Self; *From Buddhism to Mormonism: What Christianity is not!* with Scott Engle; *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to Say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle; *Meet the Prophets* with Franky Commer; *Kingdom Living: 101* with Rev. Doug Meyer and Monty Moore; *The Gospel of Matthew* with Bob Baldrige; *Introducing Our Faith: The Living God* with Scott Engle; *The Balanced Life* with Eric Roberson; *Finding your Purpose: Exploring God's Plan for your Life* with Debbie Lyons; *The Lord's Prayer* with Cecil Taylor; and *Biblical Principles and Ethical Conduct in Corporate America* with Rev. Stan Seat.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It is difficult for us to grasp the shocking nature of Jesus' welcome. Perhaps Jesus felt that he needed shock-value in order to penetrate the self-assured, self-righteous exclusion practiced by the Pharisees, the Essenes, and so many of Jesus' fellow Jews (and the rest of humanity, then and now!). It follows that the question we need to be asking ourselves is this: Where do we practice exclusion? It is easy to be blind to this. We could approach the question this way: List the five people that we would find it hardest to forgive. Do we implicitly assume that there are people who have placed themselves outside the bounds of God's forgiveness? Or perhaps we could put it this way, "God may forgive them, but I can't." Jesus calls us all to an expansive welcome, toward bold inclusion, and surprising forgiveness. How could we begin to put "shocking forgiveness" into action?

A good place to begin is recognizing that forgiveness is not simply something we practice, forgiveness is something that we are to embody. In his book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, L. Gregory Jones reminds us that forgiveness is to be part of our character; it is a virtue, not simply an action. And it is not about forgetting or ignoring. When Jesus extends his shocking welcome, it is in the context of his invitation to repent and to believe. For the earliest Christians, it was impossible to imagine that God's forgiveness would not, as Jones puts it, "induce life-long repentance," in other words, a lifelong commitment to pursuing God's way. Is this impossible for us to imagine? Are we inclined to pretend that God's forgiveness can be received without any cost? God's grace is not cheap. What does God's forgiveness cost us? (Danger - don't think of this as some sort of transaction!)