

*Sitting Still ~ Still Sitting:
At the Banquet*

Text:

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A sermon preached by
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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

³So he told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf,

because he has got him back safe and sound.’²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”



If you could be at a dinner party with any 5 people – living or historical, real or fictional – who would they be?

You’ve heard those kind of challenges. Imagining who would be at the table with you is a great way to gauge who you are. And most of us would answer with those who we admire and intrigue us. Martin Luther King, Jr, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Harriet Tubman. Pass the mashed potatoes, please.

But what if the table guests were selected for you and looked something like this? Osama bin Laden, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Steven Hawking, and Ru Paul. Would you stay and eat and join the conversation? Or would you run as far away as quickly as possible without looking back?

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them,” the religious elite were grumbling about Jesus and his choice of dinner guests. These two chapters of Luke’s Gospel are filled with images of the banquet table – pointing toward God’s banquet.

In Middle Eastern custom then, and now even, hospitality and custom were, and are, very important. A banquet room was not like we might think of a state dinner at the White House with long

tables covered in white linen surrounded by chairs and piled with silver and crystal and platters of food. A banquet room for Jesus was more like a U-shaped seating arrangement of pillows on the floor or low benches that run around the walls where one could lean back on your elbow and talk intimately with those nearby. When you were the guest of honor, you would be called to sit to the immediate right of the host and by doing so you had the host's ear and attention the rest of the evening. It mattered who was at that meal and you dare not break with custom or stretch the acceptable boundaries.

Jesus saw how people were scrambling to get the seat of honor when they were invited to the table and he took that opportunity to again teach a greater truth about a greater banquet. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet," he said, "do not sit down at the place of honor," so that when the host wants to seat the person who he or she actually invited as the honored guest, he or she has to tell you to move, but rather "when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

Counter intuitive, right? Sit low and the host will ask you to move up. Sit high and you'll probably be knocked down a few pegs.

And he said "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers [and sisters] or your relatives or rich neighbors, [just so they will] invite you in return ... But when you give a banquet, invite the poor" and others who society has rejected or marginalized. "You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

He told them a parable to emphasize this point.

Someone gave a banquet and invited friends and distinguished guests, but when they rejected because they had other things to do, the host sent word to invite all the lowest of the low and when

there was still room at the table, the host sent for anybody who wanted to come. Presumably, those considered lower than the lowest on the social scale. Because, says Jesus, that's what God's table looks like. No one turned away; everyone at the seat of honor; eat and drink all you want.

This lesson which Jesus taught over and over and over again really bothered those who thought their honored seat at God's banquet was guaranteed and solid and secure. And they called him on it. Which just gave him another opportunity to put them off kilter again.

I could imagine Jesus telling this story as a parable.

In Kansas City you can get meals like this:



Here we have a roast leg of lamb, gravy with red currant, pilaf, steamed broccoli, fresh bread, and fresh fruit.



Check out this *ras el hanout* chicken, couscous, green beans, cucumber salad, and fresh fruit.



Spiced swai, broccoli cheese casserole, garlic-Parmesan fries with house ketchup, and simple greens salad with tomato-water vinaigrette.

Sounds great, huh? Step inside and a greeter shows you to a table, one of the waitstaff takes your order after you've had time to look at the menu and see what the culinary team has been cooking up. Afterward, you're encouraged to leave reviews and suggestions for what you'd like to see on the menu. Your food comes out on warm plates with stainless utensils.

Sounds like just what you'd expect from any decent restaurant. What you might expect at the banquet table to which God invites you.

But this isn't a restaurant. It isn't a formal banquet. It's Kansas City Community Kitchen, a new way to serve people without homes who are often scrambling for their next meal. Rather than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a hug juice bottle, doesn't this seem like God's banquet which not only does God provide us but which God calls us to provide for others?

It's the kind of model that Grace Café at Arch Street UMC has created. Where we volunteered at the end of January.

One of the coordinators in Kansas City said “that everyone is welcome at their kitchen: college kids, police officers, doctors, students, volunteers. You don't have to be unable to afford food to get a bite to eat or volunteer your time. And with restaurant-quality meals at no cost, how could you resist? Getting people of all backgrounds to blend together — even for a few hours each day — is such an important way to learn and build trust within the community.”

A diner named Brian put it like this, "They're treating me good, like they don't know I'm homeless."

And that's exactly the point.

They're not treating me like anything different than who I am as a child of God. Exactly like in the Parable of the Man and his Two Sons. What do you mean the runaway son gets the ring and the fatted calf and the party with music and dancing? That's not fair. Let him eat the pea pods left from the pigs. Let him eat peanut and jelly. Not that fatted calf.

That's not how this works. That's not how any of this works.

Fred Craddock was one of America's great teachers of preaching and among the greatest story-tellers in the church's history. I once heard him tell a story that made my spine tingle and my spirit wake up. He was stuck in Winnipeg, Canada where he was to teach or preach and an early October snow storm blew in and paralyzed the city. Everything was shut down and his host could not even make it to Fred's hotel to pick him up for breakfast. He could walk to a little café in the bus depot near the hotel.

As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth. A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table and asked him what he wanted. Not knowing what the café served, Fred asked to see a menu.

"What'd ya want with a menu?" the man asked. "We have soup."
"Then I'll have soup," he said. Just what he wanted – soup for

breakfast.

The man brought the soup and Craddock says it was an unusual looking soup. It was grey, the color of a mouse. He did not know what was in it, but he took this spoon and tasted it. Awful! "I can't eat this," he said. So he sat in that crowded café warming his hands around the bowl, railing against the world, stuck in Winnipeg.

Then, the door opened and someone yelled, "Close the door," and she did. A woman came in. She was middle-aged, had on a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. The big man with the greasy apron came over and the whole café heard this conversation:

"What'd ya want?"

"Bring me a glass of water," she said.

The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question. "What'd ya want?"

"Just the water."

"Lady, you gotta order something."

"Just the water."

The man's voice started rising: "Lady, I've got paying customers here waiting for a place, now order!"

"Just the water."

"You order something or you get out!"

"Can I stay and get warm?"

"Order or get out."

So, she got up. The people at the table where she was seated got up, people around got up, the folks that let Fred sit at the table got up, Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door.

"Ok," the big man with the greasy apron said, "She can stay." And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of that soup. Fred asked the man sitting next to him, "Who is she?"

"I never saw her before," he said, "but if she ain't welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Then Craddock said, all you could hear was the sound of people eating that soup. "Well, if they can eat it, I can eat it," he said. He picked up his spoon and started eating the soup.

"It was good soup. I ate all of that soup. It was strange soup. I don't remember ever having it. As I left I remembered eating something that tasted like that before. That soup that day tasted like bread and wine. I wished that had happened in a church. But sometimes it does. Maybe here, maybe this church, maybe..."

There's the banquet that we're invited to. And the main course is mouse-grey soup. Who would have thought? And the guest of honor is a middle-aged woman from Winnipeg with an old winter coat but no hat, blown in off the snowy street, with no ability to pay for soup, someone wanting to simply get warm for a minute. She's the guest of honor? Well, says Jesus, she and the tax collector and the hooker and the drug addict and the Ebola-infected guy and the pimply-faced kid and the confused old man and the transgender teen and yes, even your child who ran off, squandered all they, the kid who came crawling back begging for a morsel of bread ... yes, that one is welcome to sit at the banquet ... and even the loyal pain who is jealous because the other one came limping home and gets the welcome mat swept and the silver polished so there can be a party ... yes, that one too. Well, you get then picture I think.

No questions asked. No fees charged. No one turned away.

And, oh by the way, you ... you are invited to take a seat as well.

Come, eat, be filled, and know you are welcome.

Amen.