

Trinity United Methodist Church, Iron Mountain, Michigan
The 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 3, 2019, 10:30 a.m.
Rev. Geri Hamlen

Jesus was an astute observer of people, of families, of crowds and of parties. And there were times when he didn't say much. And there were times when Jesus seemed to really need to do commentary and teaching on what was going on. If Jesus was here with us today, I bet he would be a blogger and have a twitter account for the days when he just had talk about what was going on.

There was this one Sabbath, when Jesus went to dine at the house of one of the Pharisee, Jewish leaders. I know that the Adult SS class is studying a book about the Sermon on the Mount and there's a lot of teaching that goes on in Matthew 5 – 8. Maybe Luke 14 should be called the Sermon at the Dinner party because Jesus does a lot of teaching there too...I'm just going to pull one little segment out of that section. This is the after dinner story Jesus tells in this house of a rich man. It's a parable, intended to move us closer to the heart and mind of Christ, taken from the NLT.

Gospel Reading Luke 14:16-24 (New Living Translation)

Jesus replied with this story:

“A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations.

When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests,

‘Come, the banquet is ready.’

But they all began making excuses.

One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’

Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out.

Please excuse me.’

Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can't come.’

“The servant returned and told his master what they had said.

His master was furious and said,

‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town
and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’

After the servant had done this, he reported,

‘There is still room for more.’

So his master said,

‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges
and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full.

For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.”

The words of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

In light of this story, let's listen to the choir sing ‘Is there Room for a Sinner.’

Hymn of Epiphany

Is There Room for a Sinner?

Choir

Flute: Diana Hunt

We've been talking about parties...how being a follower of Jesus is yes, a journey but yes, it is also a party—if you look at it that way. If you consider how many times Jesus goes out to dinner and how many celebrations and weddings and dinner parties he attends! One author, I think it was Bishop Spong in the Episcopal church, said of Jesus, 'That man ate his way through the book of Luke. It's a wonder he didn't weigh 300 pounds!'

I imagine that if Jesus was with us today, he too would be looking forward to a Super Bowl party. Not so much with those Pharisees or with the problematic tax collectors or the argumentative priests. No I would put my money on Jesus watching the big game with Mary and Martha and Lazarus who were his friends. Because parties with close friends are the most fun, aren't they? So much less stress than when you're trying to impress people from work or even if you have a party to get to know people from church there's always that anxiety about cleaning the house and making sure there's enough of everything and that the cooking gets done on time. It must be even worse for those who entertain for business...the stakes are even higher in terms of impressing a boss, or the Dean of a college if you're trying to get tenure.

Because, even with the closest of friends, a party is never just a party..then or now. We're many centuries away from this parable that Jesus told and many thousands of miles from the Middle East culture. But we can sense, even so, that this man who prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations...had something at stake. Scholars of Ancient history study the writings of that era and find that among the wealthy and the elite...there was a strict code of conduct.

First of all, banquets were totally exclusive.

Only people, men I should say, from a certain social position and with a five star net value would be invited. This party was like that. The man who did the inviting must have had a lot of money to make for a great banquet. The man with five ox...was probably an absentee landlord because the 5 oxen wouldn't be worth much there in the city. The man who bought a field must have had some cash to do that and we all know how expensive weddings can be and in that place and time, the groom's family did the heavy lifting for the wedding party.

Another thing in that day and age...There was a strict code and A system of favors granted and favors returned.

If you were invited to a fancy party...you were expected to put on a fancy party yourself and 'pay back' the one who invited you. And if you put on a glorious banquet, you could and should rightfully expect to be reimbursed with an invitation to an equally elaborate party.

Now we don't know which of those two things was happening at this party that Jesus was talking about. The man sending the invites: Was he paying back favors? Or was he stocking up on some social capital in expectation of future pay backs? **We don't know.** No one at the time Jesus told the story would have known either.

That's the way Jesus worked with his parables. A mystery wrapped in a question followed by a riddle. But we all know that something was going on below the surface and something was going wrong in this scenario. Because the hoped for guests were turning their back on the invitation...not a good sign.

And...**we don't know** if they were refusing the invite because they were mean, selfish, rude or...if the man inviting them flunked some one of the social acceptability tests. And this was his punishment.

So the stage is set and no surprise...the 'money people' stuck together and went to...or didn't go to... the same parties. And when one of those wealthy men said 'I'm not going to *his* party' And the other one heard that and said 'Me neither, I'm not going.' Then the third one and on down the line...there was one unhappy rich guy, who had invited all the people who were just like him but for some reason obscured by history and the wisdom of Jesus they all just left him holding the bag with a full banquet ready to serve and nobody came to the party. We don't know why but we know...

This guy was mad. Livid. Maybe we think out of all proportion? But who are we to say. We weren't there. We don't live in a time and a place where party protocol is so intense, do we? There's not that much at stake for us if someone doesn't show up for a Super Bowl party but for him, the rich guy, this was a huge betrayal of 'the code.'

And it worked on that man in such a major kind of way that he cracked under the pressure and completely broke ranks with his social class and said...**So what. I don't care. They disrespect me so I'm going show them...and bring in the poor. And the crippled. And the blind. And the lame.**

And he sent his servant outside his gated and walled in community. Into the nasty streets and run-down housing districts to bring them in from the other side of the railroad tracks...knowing full well that poor, sick and even homeless people who were not even allowed in the rich part of town. Locked gates and security guards.

He was breaking all of the rules that everyone took for granted and he was endangering the neighborhood. Bringing down the housing values. And there was still room for more in his house so he said go on outside the city walls and bring in the people living in the shadow of the city...the leather workers, the prostitutes, the bandits, those who were running from the law. **Let 'm get scared or upset, I'm doing this thing and filling my house my way.**

Obviously an extreme reaction. Coming from a place of hurt, anger, vengeance even. He wasn't working from the purest, loving, well-thought out motives, was he? No...he was acting from An anger that energized him. That broke through the brittle and false construct of self-serving social etiquette. Creating a Scary and even Chaotic situation that was socially disruptive. Turning the who whole world upside down.

But think about it, maybe this was the riddle inside the mystery...this rich guy Jesus talked about, as angry as he was, wound up doing exactly what Jesus wants us to do. Maybe he was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons but Jesus wants us to bring to the party people who are over-looked, under-paid, poorly dressed, uneducated, dirty

and dangerous. And this wealthy man welcomed them. And fed them banquet food. Treated them with dignity and generosity. Yes he was mad at the way his people treated him...but his anger served God's purposes...

Sometimes, sometimes it takes an unexpected, lightning rod of fury to move people away from the safety of how it's always been done and into the white hot light of how God wants it done.

It might have been easier for us, with our modern day attitudes and more laid back social setting if this wealthy man's angry hospitality came out of a more highly evolved sense of social justice. Or a more sacrificial heart-felt love for those who Jesus loves. But that's not the story Jesus is telling. This isn't a lovey-dovey story. This is a 'see the truth. Get mad and do something' story. Do something that Jesus would do and let the miracles flow kind of story. It is a story for all times and all places...

I would like to think, that angry wealthy man, in the sharing of that banquet and the opening of his doors to 'those' people...that he learned how to love his less fortunate neighbors as himself. Maybe that can only happen by going through the anger first.

And maybe that's what we have to do too...Let our Anger become action that God can use to help us break through to love and compassion.

Who will you bring to the party? The people Jesus loves? The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. Those living outside the walls...Will you do that...Trusting that God is showing us how to love our neighbors the way Jesus loves us...on the other side of our anger and fear and blindness. Wouldn't that be something really special? Love. More love. God's love through us.

Think about it and Let's remind ourselves of Paul's vision of love...while I prepare the table and the ushers come to collect your prayer cards.

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love,
I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love,
I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.