

October 11, 2020  
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Matthew 22:1-14

Over the past few weeks Jesus' parables have gotten darker and harsher. As Jesus gets closer and closer to Good Friday he is teaching his disciples what the kingdom is going to be like. He is preparing them to do ministry without him physically being there. Jesus is also trying to help the Pharisees see that the kingdom is so much more than they could ever imagine because God is so much more than they can ever imagine. This parable that Jesus tells this time seems to be just as dark – the person throwing the party is not a very nice guy – yet at the same time this parable seems to be almost kinder than his most recent ones. This time Jesus connects with a common every day activity – food. He tells a parable about a dinner party, something we can all connect with. Important conversation often happens around a dinner table. Think about our days. When we make plans with a friend we have not seen in a long time we often go out for dinner because it's easier to catch up and have conversation than it would be at a movie or shopping. Our big holidays have dinner as the main focus. Family gathers around the table a few times a year. After a wedding people are invited to a reception at which food is offered. Eating food in the company of others is a staple in our human relationships.

However, we like to enjoy a meal with people we like, a meal and friendly company goes hand in hand. If you ever had a bad date in which the conversation was awkward, the dinner surrounding the conversation seems to last forever and is not enjoyed. Dinner at a fussy in-law's house can be stressful and is not enjoyed. We like to not only enjoy the food we eat, but we also like to surround ourselves with good company to ensure a pleasant experience. Being invited to dinner is often seen as a sign of friendship.

Back when Isaac and I were in Hungary, we were the first missionaries sent to a tiny village and 30% of the village was Gypsy. Our main job description was to help build relationship with the Gypsies and the Hungarians in the village. This was a hard task because of the racist history toward Gypsies and because we knew very little Hungarian. We lived in the village for two months and barely knew anyone – and it's not like we didn't try to get to know people. We went to church, Bible study, the store, the meetings. We had the pastor of the village set up dinners for us, but we felt like people did not really want us there. Who wants to spend a half hour trying to have a conversation in which one would normally have in three minutes? That was our thinking. We thought we had to become conversational in Hungarian before we were accepted into the community, be it the Gypsies or the Hungarians. So for the next few weeks we really studied the language. We took lessons, and we talked to people in the community more than ever to practice our skills. It soon became known through the community that we were getting good at speaking Hungarian, yet we still had no dinner invitations and no new friends.

We felt like the outsiders that Jesus talks of in this text. We were not wanted because we were different. We did not know the culture well and would make little mistakes that made us stick out like a sore thumb. For instance, we would place our napkins on our lap during dinner when it was supposed to stay on the table or ask for milk to have with the dinner meal. Little cultural differences made for huge social problems. However, it turned out that it was not that we were different or that we did not know Hungarian well that kept us at a distance from the community. Rather it was that the people in the village did not know what our job was because we were not

doing anything to really help the village. When your job is to help build relationships between two groups of people it does not come with a laid out job description, and it definitely does not require any physical type of labor.

We decided to start teaching English to the grammar school kids three days a week and have an adult class once a week. We invited Gypsies and Hungarians to the classes in hopes this would be a place both groups could do something together. This is what turned everything around for us. When the people in the village felt like they were getting something in return for hospitality, then we started to get invited to people's houses for dinner, asked if we needed a ride to the grocery store, invited to cultural events, and we simply made friends.

It's not uncommon or even wrong to surround ourselves with the comfortable. We do it all the time. In this text Jesus tells us to step out of our comfort zone and invite people we normally would not invite to dinner. This can make us think that Jesus is giving us another rule to live by. We think, Jesus says not only to love our neighbor but to also love the neighbor we'd rather ignore. It's hard to truly see the invisibles in our society. We might write a check out to a cause, like St. Cyprian's Food Pantry or ELCA Disaster Relief. Or we might volunteer a few hours of our time, and we go into a person's situation to help. We go to the homeless shelter or the soup kitchen. We feel good about ourselves because we are doing something for someone who has less. What we don't do is befriend people who make us a little uncomfortable, and we certainly don't turn around and invite the poor and the other to our house for dinner. That's hard to do because as I stated earlier, we like to be in comfortable situations. So Jesus is teaching us that sometimes we have to not only help the people we'd rather ignore, but we have to love them as accept them as children of God.

However, this is only part of the message. Jesus also tells us that we should do this and not expect anything in return. We shouldn't expect a favor to be returned or expect a gift to be given or even expect a thank-you letter to come in the mail. We should not help someone with a move because we know we can ask them to help the next time we move. We should not go to a baby shower in hopes that the person will come to ours one day. We should not give a gift at Christmas and expect a gift in return. But there is more: we should not give money to a non-for-profit and expect to get to write the donation off on our taxes; we should not volunteer at a food pantry and expect a thank you at the end of the day; we should not be nice and kind and love our neighbors for any kind of gratification.

Yet we tend to keep record books in our heads. We know who helped us last and how much the gift they gave probably cost. We know how many good deeds we did in a year, and we defiantly know how much money we donated to charities. But all this record keeping, it doesn't matter. This is the heart of Jesus message for today, that it is not our job to be record keepers. We should do work for others, and we should help the poor and the lame because we know Jesus died for all. When Jesus died on the cross the record books were nailed to the cross with him. We no longer have to work to earn our way to heaven. There is no longer such a thing as works righteousness. We are all forgiven, all loved, equally. When we do work to help another one of God's children, another person that God loves, we should do it out of a spirit of hope and love.

And that's the gift that we share in each and every week at the ultimate dinner party each time we come to the altar for communion. And Jesus is the example because Jesus' dinner table is

open for all, and we all belong there. We are all invited to the table; we are all perfect enough to be in his company, and we are all accepted just as we are at the dinner party. We don't have to wear the right robe. We don't have to act or look a certain way. Jesus opens his table and only asks that we are open to loving others in return. We hope that if we walk the walk of Jesus we will be examples of his love. When we do walk the walk of Jesus we invite all to the table, and we do not expect anything in return because we remember that we are forgiven and loved by Jesus, and please, come to the party just as you are.