

“The Offensive Grace of God”**Luke 14:1-15****Rev. Andrew Connors****August 21, 2022****Proper 17¹**

Jesus is a rotten guest. On his way to eat a meal at the home of a Pharisee he heals yet another person on the Sabbath intending to get a rise out of the experts in the law and the Pharisees. They say nothing, which is particularly charitable given Jesus' in your face action, yet, rather than reciprocating their kindness, Jesus amps up the tension, criticizing all the other guests who have now gathered at the table of a Pharisee for dinner. Then he turns to the host himself and lectures him on who he should invite to such dinner parties - not his friends, not his family, not his wealthy neighbors - basically everybody currently at the table - but instead people who are considered outcasts - the poor and people with disabilities. Invite the people who have nothing they can reciprocate in the worldview of Jesus' time, the opposite of the kinds of people invited to his dinner table tonight. Jesus is a rotten guest.

On hearing Jesus' rant at the table, one of the dinner guests exclaims “Blessed is *anyone* who will eat bread in the kingdom of God” which I take as a sarcastic response to Jesus' rude behavior. Blessed is *anyone* who will eat in that kind of ridiculous realm where people aren't chosen because of their status, or their work ethic, or their character, or because they are polite company; they are chosen for no reason at all other than the host chooses to invite them.

Some have argued that this preferential option for the poor and outcast means that if you want to be in Jesus' beloved community you have to make yourself poor, or make yourself outcast. But I think that twists the entire theological point that Jesus is making. In God's realm, no one is invited because of their social ranking or what they have done or not done, or by how much they own or do not own. You can't earn your place at a table that doesn't belong to you. And yet this meritocratic system is unfathomable to most of us who spend our lives in competition to be better for something. Competing to get into the right schools, competing to get in the right jobs, competing to prove our love in relationships, competing to prove ourselves competent in social circles. Creating systems of insiders and outsiders at every turn.

The poor and the outcast expose this bankrupt insider/outsider system by their very presence - expose the exclusionary nature of our systems of power that raise some at the expense of others. But the reversal of God's kingdom doesn't so much flip the status of rich and poor, insider and outsider as much as it does away with the

¹ Note Proper 17 was actually scheduled for August 28, 2022. We switched texts in order to accommodate vacation schedules.

rankings altogether. People are people in the kingdom. Rankless, statusless people. Nothing has currency in this system. Not your money, not your degrees, not your titles, not your reputation, not your good works. You bring yourself as you are, relying completely on the generosity of the host for your seat. It's much easier to see this as good news if you are already poor, already an outsider which is why Jesus is so negative on being rich, but being rich doesn't automatically exclude anyone from the kingdom.

You might have missed that if I hadn't added the portion of text that the lectionary leaves out this week. Jesus heals a man with edema, or "dropsy" as some earlier translations call it. Edema is a condition marked by fluid retention that is accompanied by an ironic thirst for more liquids which the body can't process. In antiquity, dropsy was seen as a disease that afflicted the affluent and lazy. "Dropsy became an apt metaphor," says Scott Spencer in his commentary on Luke, "for the inexorable cravings of greed and consumption by the wealthy at the expense of the less fortunate. . .while [the man with dropsy] may have enjoyed long years of self-indulgence on the backs of unfortunate victims, it may now be killing him from within. He may literally eat and drink himself to death."²

The Pharisees likely looked on the man with dropsy as deserving what happened to him. His neglect of those less fortunate than himself would have simply given him what was coming to him in the conditional frameworks in which they and we often live. By healing this man on the sabbath Jesus would have been making the point that the rich and the affluent aren't excluded from God's care. God's kingdom levels the field for everyone. To be rich and affluent gets you nothing in the kingdom. But neither does your self-righteous piety.

What we find then, is a God who, in the words of theologian Douglas Ottati, not only eats and drinks with all the wrong people, but heals the wrong people, too.³ And that eating and drinking and healing, according to Ottati, is not a few isolated occurrences but an intentional missional strategy. It's the practice of eating, drinking and celebrating randomly with everyone which is inherently transgressive of most of the ways in which most people choose to live in Jesus' day. It still is. The terms of how it's transgressive change, but it's still offensive. You'd be fine in this congregation if word spread that you had invited homeless people home for dinner because most people here don't think homeless people are undeserving guests, but spread the word that you threw a banquet for your Trumpy neighbors and see what kind of reaction you get.

In Jesus' time eating and drinking with others was a way of forming community. And Ottati makes the point that the same is true in our day. Going to work or school

² F. Scott Spencer, *Luke: The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2019, pp. 366-367.

³ Douglas Ottati shared his lecture notes for the Orr Lectures with my preaching group a number of years ago. I do not have a date on the manuscript which was entitled "Eating and Drinking with all the Wrong People: Toward a Christology for the 21st Century."

with people makes them your acquaintances, he says. But when you have them over for dinner, that makes them “*your people*.”⁴

This is both extraordinarily good news and cause for concern. I find it incredibly reassuring to know that there is no table that God can't get to. There is no table in the halls of the highest power that Jesus can't get to; no hate group that God isn't strategizing how to get to. No homogenous group that God isn't scheming on how to disrupt. Jesus is sent to all those tables with good news that God loves all people and wants all people to enjoy each others' presence when love is truly extended and practiced in all of our social arrangements and relationships. This boundary-crossing “open commensality,” as Dominic Crossan calls it, brings new possibilities that can turn things around.⁵

But the troubling part of this news is that most of the tables that we set are too small, too insular, too built on the unspoken but very much operative assumptions that I can only relate to people who are like me - who think like me, or believe like me, or look like me, or are in my class, or my race, or my educational pedigree. Jesus is coming to disrupt my tables, too, to free me from my own status traps of judgment that lie just beneath the surface of my thinking, and to remind me that part of my mission as a follower of Jesus is to be about similar work. To trespass against my own rigid boundaries of who I will break bread with as part of God's game changing work to bring people together.

I know that seems impossible in this day and age with so much public violence on the uptick and a poll at the beginning of this year showing that 1 in 4 Americans are saying that it's okay to use violence against the government, with 1 in 10 Americans saying violence is justified “right now.”⁶ I know it may sound offensive as if I was arguing that there is a moral equivalency between excluding from your dinner some of the angry white people who have resorted to violence to try to protect white supremacy and the racist exclusion of people of color or lgbtq people from the dining tables of some of those same people. It helps to note that Jesus doesn't hold back any of his clarity about what is at stake, or what he sees as unjust when he dines at any of these tables. He does not accept fellowship at the cost of his own silence.

No, it's just that someone has to go after those people who God isn't finished with yet. Someone has to risk their own safety or maybe it's their own hope in order to build the beloved community that Jesus promises is within our grasp. It's like Abraham Joshua Heschel said so eloquently - in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Ottati.

⁶ The COVID States Project as reported on by Matthew Schwarz for *National Public Radio*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/31/1076873172/one-in-four-americans-say-violence-against-the-government-is-sometimes-okay>

But it would be a mistake if you heard this sermon today and took from it that “Andrew wants me to invite Trumpers to dinner.” I don’t know who God wants you to invite to dinner, if anyone. No, what I hope you take from this sermon is that Jesus has invited you to a great feast and part of your training to be there is by sitting at table with the people God has chosen to invite. Some of those people you’re going to wish God had not invited. And guess what, some of those people are going to wish you hadn’t been included on the invitation either. And the best way to deal with that discomfort is to stay open to the possibility that God knows what God is doing better than you. Some of the people invited to that table aren’t going to change. They’re going to become more rigid in their thinking, more exclusionary in their practices. They will decide that they’d rather be in charge of their own guest list.

But other people are going to grow in their compassion and knowledge of others. They are going to see beyond the groups that their social media profiles or their political affiliation has assigned them to. They are going to hear words from you and you are going to hear words from them and both be changed for the better, trying to make a little more room for each other, making life a little easier for both of you and for others each of you had written off. I hope to be in that open-minded group that is willing to be surprised by the offensive grace of God. I hope you are in it, too.