

Jeremiah 18:1-12 MSG ~ Luke 14:15-24

Essential Work

13th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Communion ~ Labor Day Weekend ~ Sept. 4, 2022

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

Awkward silence. Did he really say that? I'm sure you have been at a dinner table with family or friends, where someone says something shocking—way beyond the bounds of polite dinner conversation. Something controversial or outrageous that makes everyone else squirm. Talking stops, some at the table nervously take a sip or gulp of their wine. And all of a sudden you feel compelled to say something, anything, to try and smooth things over. Or to change the subject gracefully.

This is the most likely explanation for what the dinner guest says at the beginning of our gospel lesson today. Little did he know his "smooth things over" comment likely prompted the parable that Jesus spins out next. Today we are picking up where we left off last week, mid-bite during the main course with Jesus at a dinner at the house of the leader of the Pharisees.

Let's back up one verse to remind us all what Jesus, said to his host, the Pharisee, in v. 14: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." And yes, he really *did* say that.

Communion Meditation:

One morning a mother was preparing pancakes for her two sons, Kevin, who was 5, and Ryan, who was 3. As brothers sometimes do, they were arguing over who would get the first pancake. Their mom, as mothers sometimes do, saw this as an opportunity for teaching them a lesson about Jesus. She said, "If Jesus were sitting here at our table he would say, "let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait." Quickly big brother Kevin turned to his younger brother, Ryan, and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"

Who *wants* to wait for a pancake when we are really hungry? Who chooses to let someone else go in front of them in line at the grocery store when we are in a hurry to get to something important? Today's scripture lesson is a continuation of the theme we worked on last Sunday, Jesus' call to "sit low and look wide" as I put it in last week's sermon. We might wish that Jesus would move off this lesson, but instead he doubles down on it, now with the parable that is both radically invitational and alarmingly urgent. The stakes are high: Wrong choices have consequences.

Did you notice? The Jesus who invites us to this Table accepts no excuses. Indeed, the Jesus who invites us to this Table says you *do* have a choice. Especially when you feel like you don't. We can choose to come to Jesus' "Great Dinner" or not. What's your excuse when you feel

the divine nudge to give the other person the first pancake, and you do not? Let's broaden this out beyond breakfast pancakes and maple syrup. When you feel the divine nudge to change course, to shift your schedule and let go of whatever you thought was so essential, do you? Or what about when you are so sure that you are right, and you are unwilling to consider another point of view, what is your excuse? We all have them fresh and ready to go. They pop out of our mouths, "No. I can't go there. Not right now, and here's my excuse."

Let's quickly look at the three men and their three excuses in Jesus' parable. The more you look, the more you will see that Jesus' story borders on humor by absurdity. The first guy excuses himself from the party because he just bought a piece of land and needs to go see it. Who buys a piece of property sight unseen? This is way before Zillow or Zoom, mind you. Then the second guy, apparently just bought not one, but five oxen without checking them out first. Who does that? Who buys a tractor or a truck without a test drive? However clueless these two guys may appear; their excuses showcase their obvious choice to privilege their possessions over their relationship to the host of the dinner.

Jesus really has fun with the third guy. Standard story telling often involves three characters where the third reverses the pattern of the first two. Like the Samaritan, in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He is the third person (after the Priest and the Levite) who sees the man beat up on the side of the road and unlike the first two, chooses to stop and help the man in the ditch. But in today's parable, the third guy *does not reverse* the pattern and say, "yes, thank you very much for inviting me, I'm coming!" Not at all. In fact, the third guy who uses his recent marriage as his excuse, not only continues the pattern of the first two, but amps up his rejection from, "please accept my regrets" to flatly stating, "I cannot come." Could he not have brought his new bride with him to the dinner?

What about us here today? What is your excuse? Notice the next time you choose to say "no" to the call to rearrange your day or your outlook in order to come to the Table of Grace. Unexpected opportunities arise in our day to say, "yes." To open yourself to discover a new level of communion and connection you maybe never thought possible. Anywhere, anytime they might pop up. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." (Psalm 23:5, KJV). You know this line from the 23rd Psalm. Yes, since the time of the Exodus, we learned that God *can* "spread a Table in the wilderness." (Psalm 78:19) Talk about the ultimate pop-up food truck. When enemies are near? When feeling adrift in the wilderness? The catch is whether or not we say "yes" to God's invitation. To the table where "everything is ready now."

Our host in this parable is determined to fill his Table with anyone and everyone who will come. And that Table is incomplete until the second and third round of invitations are issued. For the second round, Jesus repeats his list of social outcasts of his day and tells his slave to now bring, "the poor, the crippled the blind and the lame." But wait, there's more! Still more room, at the Table, more inviting to be done. The third and final round of invitations in this parable goes out even further. "Go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in." By that he means go out and call to me the homeless and the landless.

In Jesus' immediate context, perhaps he was alluding to the Gentiles; that is all who were the outsiders, the "not us" because they were *not* Jews, like Jesus and all those at the Pharisee's table. Whether we like it or not, our Lord and Savior is a relentless and indiscriminating inviter. Whatever version of Jesus we might prefer to follow, this is the Jesus who came to save us: the one who calls us to invite and to welcome the least, the last, the lonely. At Jesus' Table, the outsiders are in. What about here in Marshfield, in our nation, and worldwide? The number of refugees, displaced from their homes because of war, famine, or climate change is growing at an alarming rate. There are so many who feel themselves outside for a variety of reasons. Think about who else has no sense of place or worth. These are the ones whom Jesus is talking about in this parable for us.

Perhaps you heard, on Sept. 1, the US Department of Labor inducted the essential workers of the coronavirus pandemic into the Labor Hall of Fame, in recognition of their sacrifices and continuous efforts to support America's communities through the pandemic. Essential workers, including teachers, grocery workers, health care workers, and transportation workers, all sustained our economy and helped their communities before, during, and after the worst days of the pandemic. Secretary of Labor, Marty Walsh, at this induction said, "As we honor these essential workers, we also have a new understanding and appreciation of how our economy and society depend on the tremendous hard work, commitment, creativity, resilience and sacrifices of workers every single day." The essential workers who passed away during the pandemic were also honored.¹ I pray we step up our pandemically inspired appreciation of "essential workers" by finding ways not only to give them pizza parties, but a place at the Table where they are rightly honored and justly paid, every day.

If nothing else, the pandemic has certainly revealed inequities and disparities that Jesus came to free us from. When we hear ourselves making excuses for keeping things as they are, I hear the voice of Jesus and this parable inviting us to the Table where transformation can happen. To say "yes" to this invitation is our essential work as Christ followers. If you want to be my disciple, I hear Jesus saying, "Come to the Table where outsiders and insiders can sit down and eat and talk and rock each other's babies. Come be my essential workers."

The time to say "yes" is now. Not later. That's the kicker at the end of our lesson. When Jesus says that scary thing at the end, "For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner," (v.24) I think he is teaching us that our chances to step up, come and go. Moments for transformational conversation come out of nowhere and then, they are gone. Yes, there is grace. Yes, we get do overs and second chances. But that particular chance, to say or do that particular thing, is gone.

As Michael Gerson articulated in his recent opinion piece in the Washington Post, "When we are caked with the mud of political struggle, and tired of Pyrrhic victories that seed new hatreds, and frightened by our own capacity for contempt, the way of life set out by Jesus comes like a clear bell that rings above our strife. It defies cynicism, apathy, despair and all ideologies that dream of dominance. It promises that every day, if we choose, can be the first

day of a new and noble manner of living. Its most difficult duties can feel much like purpose and joy. And even our halting, halfhearted attempts at faithfulness are counted by God as victories.”ⁱⁱ

The potter is at the wheel. The Creator of each and all of us, is still at work. She has not given up. Our Creator Redeemer God keeps inviting us. And, we always have a choice to say “yes” to God. The next time you hear yourself say, “I had no choice.” Take a breath and ask yourself, “Really?” In a few moments, Jesus is giving a party, and we are all invited! Bring your whole self, excuses and all. You already said “yes” to attending worship here with us: well done! Now say “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to come to his Table. It’s not pancakes and syrup. It stacks up to something far greater. And there is a place right here, for you.

ⁱ <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osec/osec20220901>

ⁱⁱ Michael Gerson, Sept. 1, 2022, *Washington Post*, Opinion Essay