

Opening the Table, Opening Hearts

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

November 22, 2020

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In the time of Jesus, there was a fairly clear sense of who was honourable, or honoured, and who was not. Whether or not you were an honoured guest at a party depended not on your income level or how elegantly you dressed. It was your public reputation that determined where you sat at a banquet or what parties you were invited to.

If you had money but lacked honour, you were called “poor.” The reverse was true: if you had no money but enjoyed a good reputation, you would be person of honour. I was told by a now-deceased federal MP that a clergyperson has greater honour than the Prime Minister! Imagine that! Not any more – thankfully, right?? Seriously, though, I wonder where I would be seated as I arrived at one of those banquets.

My dishonour would be based on anything about me that seemed out of the ordinary in the time of Jesus – physically, mentally, or even how socially adept I am. Being “poor” meant that you did not have a place at the table. Being “poor” made people vulnerable, “religiously, economically, politically, and domestically.”

This is a powerful social hierarchy in the time of Jesus, but are there not echoes of the “who’s in” and “who’s out” system in our modern culture? Moving from “poor” and invisible to “honoured” in Jesus’ time was rare; how does that compare with today? Of course, you and I know that Jesus regularly criticizes this class system that isolates and excludes.

Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures proclaimed, and Jesus re-affirmed using God’s kin-dom language; the Biblical vision of how community is structured is grounded in justice, and righteousness that flows like a river.

When the dinner guest says, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God,” Jesus responds with a story that helps us better understand what God’s kin-dom could look like.

Jesus illustrates what “anyone” means in the kin-dom; the first two people in his parable make dumb excuses,

- the third invitee seems to send regrets because they don’t want to feel obligated to invite the host to their party later.

They insult the host’s honour by refusing a generous offer. The storyline is interesting enough here, but Jesus goes on. Here goes Jesus again, turning things upside down; this time social expectations are flipped on their head. The wealthy host opens the party to the poor, and, particularly significant, to people who cannot reciprocate. Imagine that holy party – “the poor, rippled, blind, and lame,” but the host says, “let’s reach out beyond the walls of the city”! Implied are street workers, addicts, people asking for money.

At this party, the party you and I are to promote exuberantly, we who might feel (even secretly) honoured, are to embrace a party that screams dishonour to society.

“Anyone” willing to accept the invitation can eat bread in the kin-dom of God, not just those who can pay the price of admission.

The open invitation of the great dinner is echoed today by the vision of the prophet Isaiah: “everyone who thirsts... Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” ¹

God, the host, models generosity:

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty... For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ²

What a banquet God is calling us invite people to! We celebrate the richest blessings that God has poured on us. Today we celebrate our Scottish Presbyterian roots as a church. In gratitude, we respond by presenting ourselves and our treasures to God’s work of changing this world.

We recognize who we are, and, whose we are; God’s children, stewards entrusted with God’s Creation, entrusted with an abundance that multiplies when it is shared. That is what it means when God’s kin-dom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Thanks be to God. May we courageously, extravagantly, invite others to the Banquet. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 55: 1

² Isaiah 55: 11–13