

Sermon Text: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I begin my sermon, I'm going to focus on the second part of this text not so much on the humility part, but on whom we invite and why we invite. I want to tell a story.

A rancher was once bragging, the opposite of humility. He was bragging to a visitor. He said, “When I get in my truck at sun up, I can't drive all the way to the side of my ranch. Can't make it to the other side of my ranch before sundown.” Trying to impress the visitor. The visitor said, “Yeah, I used to have a truck like that.”

Now, in our Gospel text Jesus tells a parable that sort of lets the air out of some of the guests at the banquet. He had seen them scrambling for the places of honor, and He tells the parable to remind them of the virtues of humility. He lets them know the one who is wrapped up in himself makes a very small package, or in Jesus' language, everyone who makes themselves great will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be made great. Then Jesus goes one step further beyond this lesson in manners. He teaches that the kind of self-centered ego, who only invites and only desires their social equals or their social betters are completely missing out on life as God intended. He goes from a manner and politeness lesson into something deeply theological.

The banquet throughout the Gospels is a symbol of the Kingdom of God, and if we are invited guests, according to another parable of Jesus, our job is to go out and invite others into this banquet. Anyone, anyone who will come – the poor, the blind, the lame and those whose social or political or financial or temporal situation can offer us nothing. God wants them in the party. God has invited the outcast into His party. Invited guests, invited guests are supposed to know that. Invited guests know that their job is to invite others, any and all others, whomsoever will come as the King James language states. That's the second and most profound teaching of this text, and I believe it hits us squarely between the eyes.

We are not important. God's Kingdom is. What someone has to offer this church is not important. What we have to offer them in Christ is. When you give a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors. If you do, they may pay you back. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

If, in our life and faith, we only seek out those who can do us good or raise us up, that pretty much makes us the focus of all our relationships. We judge them, whoever they are, on what they can do for us.

Now, I once showed up at a party, the wrong party, uninvited. I know what it can feel like to be an uninvited guest. At my last church, one of my older and much wealthier

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members, also a Wofford graduate, got a letter about a local gathering of Wofford alumni, and he said, “Jim, come on. It’s for Wofford alumni.” I said, “Now, I never got that letter. I don’t think it’s for everybody.” He said, “Nonsense! Come on. It’s for all the Wofford grads in the area. You just moved here. They just don’t have your address yet. It’s a barbecue. Come on.” I said, “Okay. All right, but I’m not sure they want me there.” When I got there, I found the president of the college, the chaplain of the college, two heads of the departments at the college, and they were all at a lodge on a lake out in the country on this gentleman farmer’s estate. They began talking about the tens of millions of dollars they needed to build a new building. I was certain I was at the wrong party. They didn’t misplace my invitation. I was never on that list. This was a party for people who could give back.

Often, we seek out people who might pay us back in our personal situations and in our church life! We say, oh, go after him! He’s a doctor. Go after her. She’s a lawyer or professor or someone at Lander or what have you. Or we love only people in our personal lives who love us back, or we befriend folks if the friendship will somehow be to our advantage. That’s not the way God worked in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God loved people who were dying and lost, who had nothing to offer back. He sent His son for those who needed cleansing. He sent His son to give life to the spiritually dead. Jesus came eating with and associating with and loving known public sinners, and He was criticized for that. He gave the self-righteous Pharisees of His day a very hard time. There’s no reason to think He would not give self-righteous sinners of our day an equally hard time.

God offered love, forgiveness and grace to us before we responded. Before we had any faith whatsoever, the offer was there. We were invited before we were good enough, and no one is good enough. We were invited before we had anything, any faith, any trust, any repentance to offer God.

John argues, “If God loved us that way, we ought to love one another that way.” 1 John 4:10 reads, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His son to be the expiation for our sins.” God loved and invited us first, yet we in the church often misunderstand our place. We often think that we are the gatekeepers. We are the judges of where people will feel comfortable worshipping, and we sometimes think maybe somewhere else.

We have only one marching order as a church, and that is to go and make disciples. It is invitation cast out upon the world without boundaries, without limits, without any need for us to channel or customize or limit the guest list. If you recall, at Jesus’ birth, which was in a barn, and where He was laid in a feeding trough, He was an outcast, and He was first worshiped not by real royalty, but by the magi, these non-kosher, stargazing magicians, non-Jews from Iran. Today, people who look nothing like us are invited and actually show up for the heavenly banquet. Weird people keep hearing their name called by God. Just when we think we have it all nailed down, all figured out, we who consider

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ourselves insiders, are shocked to find that we have missed it. That those whom we have listed as outsiders may know more about what God is doing in the world than we do.

In his last congregation before becoming Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and y'all on the birthday of roasting, you said I quoted; I got the implication that I quoted Will Willimon too much, Bishop Willimon now. Well, I'm quoting him again. In his last congregation before he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, Willimon was at a church where they decided they really needed to grow. As I look out on our Labor Day crowd, I think we need to grow, too. So they decided to launch a program of evangelism, and that does sound familiar because we're on the edge of that as well. Now, very often in United Methodist circles, evangelism means we had better go out and get new members or we're going to die! That's what that means. Anyway, they studied a church program, and the church growth program suggested a system of door-to-door visitation. After organizing themselves into groups of two, on an appointed Sunday afternoon, they set out to visit, to invite people to the church. The teams went out armed with packets of pamphlets describing their church, pamphlets talking about the United Methodist Church and flyers portraying Willimon with his smiling, friendly pastor face, inviting people to their church. Each team was given a map with their assigned street.

Helen and Gladys, two of the members, were given a map, and they were clearly told to go down to Summit Drive, and turn right. That's what they were told. Willimon even heard the team leader tell them that. You go down to Summit Drive and turn right. Do you hear me, Helen? That's Summit Drive and turn right. Helen and Gladys, both older, lifetime teachers, were better at giving than receiving directions, and they turned left. They turned left venturing down into the housing projects to the west of Summit Drive. Of course, that meant Helen and Gladys were proceeding to evangelize the wrong neighborhood! Later that same afternoon, each team returned to the church to make their report. Helen and Gladys had only one interested person to report, a woman named Verline. No one else on the route was interested, no one but Verline.

Now, Verline lived with her two children in a three-room apartment in the projects, and although she had never been to a church in her life, Verline wanted to visit Willimon's church. Willimon thought to himself, and these aren't good thoughts, but he wrote that he thought to himself, “This is what you get when you don't follow directions! This is what you get when you don't do what your pastor tells you to do! You get a woman from the projects named Verline!” The next Sunday, Helen and Gladys proudly presented Verline in the 11:00 worship service along with her two wiry and wild children. To the surprise of some, she liked the service so much that she wanted to attend the women's Thursday morning Bible study so Helen and Gladys picked her up and brought her to the study.

On that Thursday study, Verline appeared proudly clutching her new Bible, a gift from Helen. It was her first Bible she had ever seen or held, much less owned. Willimon was leading the study that morning. The passage was on Luke 4 about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and he asked the group, “Have any of you ever been tempted and with Jesus' help resisted temptation? Have any of you ever refused temptation because of

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your commitment to Christ?” One of the women told how just the week before there had been some confusion at the supermarket checkout counter, and before she knew it, she was standing out in the parking lot, and she had a loaf of bread she had not paid for, and she confessed, “At first I thought, they have enough of my money!” Then she said no, you’re a Christian, and she went back in and paid for the loaf of bread. Willimon made some small approving comment about it. Then Verline spoke up on a completely different order of magnitude. She said, “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine really big, and you know what that stuff’s like. That stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway my boyfriend, not the one I’ve got now, but the one who was the daddy of my first child, that one, well, we knocked over a gas station one night, and got \$200 out of it. It was as easy as taking candy from a baby. Well, my boyfriend said to me, “Let’s knock over that 7-11 down the corner, but something in me said no, no, I held up that gas station with you, but I ain’t gonna knock over no convenience store! Now, he beat me bad, but I still said no, and it made me feel like somebody. It made me feel like somebody.” There was stunned silence, and then Willimon managed to mutter, “Well, that is resisting temptation, and that is sort of what the text is about. I think it’s time for prayer.” He closed the session.

Afterward, Willimon stumbled out of the church parlor, and he was standing out in the parking lot, and he was helping Helen into her Plymouth. She said to him, “You know, I can’t wait to get home, and get on the phone, and invite people to come next Thursday. To be honest preacher your studies used to be just a little bit dull, but I think I can get a crowd for this!”

You never know who’s going to show up and respond to God’s call. You never know who’s going to darken the church’s door. You never know who is going to hear God’s call and decide to say yes. You never know.

I heard, and this is true, several decades ago, of a South Carolina United Methodist Church, which used to have their program director go and interview prospective members to see if they would be comfortable at our church, to see if they’d fit in. That’s backwards. It is not our job to seek out those who would be comfortable here. It is our job to make comfortable here and welcome whosoever will come looking for God’s love, peace and hope, and more than that, not just wait for them to wander into the door, but to invite and to welcome and when they come to help them find their place in a Sunday school class, a men’s group, a women’s circle, in whatever small group where they can find family and belong.

As long as we are here and with a cross on the building, the world knows what we sometimes forget. The invitation is to whomsoever will come. What a wonderful strange party God is preparing. Here we are at the entrance hall. This church is one of the entrance halls to God’s Kingdom. Let us invite and welcome and receive whomsoever will come. After all, it is not our invitation. It is not our party. It is God’s. As invited guests, God has given us the job to go out and invite others. Amen.