

Acts 2:46-47

Luke 14:1-24

May 4, 2014

Kirkwood Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at Camp Kirkwood, Watha, NC

THE JOYFUL FEAST OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

As Nancy and I drove home from Louisburg on Thursday afternoon, we talked about what we would have for supper. When we had named several different options, I said, “You know what I would really like for supper tonight?” Nancy asked, “What?” I said, “I’d really like one of Aunt Lillian’s spreads.” Nancy laughed and said, “That would be good. Her meals are like church covered dish dinners.”

We stopped by to see Nancy’s Aunt Lillian and Uncle Percy in Lumberton a number of years ago. We were on our way somewhere else, and knew we would be there around lunchtime. Aunt Lillian said, “Just plan to eat with us. I’ll put a little something together.” Well, Nancy’s not kidding. When we walked into Aunt Lillian’s kitchen for lunch, it was almost like being in the Currie Building for one of our covered dish dinners. For folks who would have been happy with a sandwich and a drink, Aunt Lillian’s lunch was a feast – a feast of food and a feast of hospitality!

Have any of you ever seen the movie *Babette’s Feast*? It tells the story of two sisters in a remote 19th century Danish town. Their father was the founding pastor of a small church in town. The sisters turn down offers to leave the village and their father discourages them from being married. They choose to stay with him. After his death, they continue to keep the little church going, even as the congregation ages over the next 50 years.

One day, Babette arrives at the door with a letter of reference from one of the sisters’ former suitors. Although they cannot afford her services, they take her in because she is a refugee. Babette offers to work for free as a housemaid and cook. She prepares bland meals for the sisters for fourteen years. Meanwhile, a friend in Paris continues to renew a lottery ticket for Babette each year. She receives the news one day that she has won 10,000 francs. Instead of returning to Paris, Babette convinces the sisters to let her fix a meal to celebrate the 100th anniversary of their father’s birth.

As exotic foods begin to arrive from Paris, the sisters and the members of the congregation get more and more worried that the meal is too extravagant, even sinful. They agree to eat the meal, but to show no enjoyment or talk about the food as they eat. A general joins them at the table, the son of a woman who is a pillar of the church. Since he is married to a member of the royal court, he has quite a bit of experience eating grand meals. He is the only person who comments on the delicacies as he compares them favorably to other magnificent feasts he has eaten. One movie review says, “Although the other celebrants refuse to comment on the earthly pleasures of their meal, Babette’s gifts breaks down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them

physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled, and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table.” At the end of the movie, the sisters assume Babette will leave and return to Paris. However, Babette tells them she has no more money. As it turns out, Babette had been the head chef at a Parisian restaurant. She knew her feast for the villagers would cost her all of her 10,000 francs.

Babette’s feast is the story of hospitality, love, and grace. Babette’s feast shows the power of breaking bread together and how reconciliation can come from the simple act of eating together.

Today we have the joy and privilege of coming to our Lord’s feast at the table which is laid before us. Listen to the words of invitation: “Friends, this is ***the joyful feast of the people of God!*** They will come from east and west, and from north and south. According to Luke, when our risen Lord was at table with his disciples, he took the bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. This is the Lord’s table. Our Savior invites those who trust him to share ***the feast which he has prepared.***”

In the next few months, you’ll be hearing more and more about the new Presbyterian hymnal we will use in our worship. The session has unanimously and enthusiastically approved a recommendation from the Worship Ministry Team to purchase *Glory to God*. I have been using the new hymnal already in my worship planning, and Karla and the choir have been singing from *Glory to God*. Our hymn of preparation for coming to the Lord’s table this morning, “In the Singing (Bread of Peace)” is from the new hymnal.

Among many wonderful features of the new hymnbook is the great variety of hymns about the Lord’s Supper. The music to the hymns is beautiful and the lyrics are profound and moving. I want to share the words to one of the communion hymns, “The Trumpets Sound, the Angels Sing, The Feast Is Ready.”

*The trumpets sound; the angels sing; the feast is ready to begin.
The gates of heaven are open wide, and Jesus welcomes you inside.
Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight.
Come and revel in heaven’s love and light.
Take your place at the table of the King.
The feast is ready to begin; the feast is ready to begin.*

*Tables are laden with good things; O taste the peace and joy he brings.
He’ll fill you up with love divine; he’ll turn your water into wine.
Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight.
Come and revel in heaven’s love and light.
Take your place at the table of the King.
The feast is ready to begin; the feast is ready to begin.*

The hungry heart he satisfies, offers the poor his paradise.

*Now hear all heaven and earth applaud,
the amazing good news of the Lord.
Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight.
Come and revel in heaven's love and light.
Take your place at the table of the King.
The feast is ready to begin; the feast is ready to begin.*

The Lord's Supper is often compared to the great heavenly banquet or feast. When we come to the table to break the bread and drink the cup, we catch a glimpse of the joyful feast of the people of God at God's heavenly table. When we come to the table to break the bread and drink the cup, we think about brothers and sisters in the faith around the world who also come to the Lord's table to enjoy the feast which he has prepared.

One Sabbath, Jesus went to the house of one of the Pharisees for a meal. While he was there, Jesus noticed how the host and different dinner guests acted. The guests claimed the seats of honor for themselves. The host invited his friends and acquaintances to break bread together. When Jesus commented on their behavior, one of the dinner guests said, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" That's when Jesus told the parable about "the great dinner."

Notice who is on the guest list in Jesus' parable. The original "invitees" include people who decline the invitation – someone had bought a piece of land; someone had bought five yoke of oxen; someone had just gotten married. None of the "A-list" folks showed up! They were too busy with their own concerns to enjoy the feast which had been prepared for them. The "B-list" doesn't sound anything like the "A-list": the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame – and then even more people are invited to the feast.

In his commentary on the gospel of Luke, Fred Craddock pulls no punches when he talks about the meaning of Jesus' parable about "the great dinner" for the church today: "Here Jesus is not calling on Christians to provide for the needs of the poor and the disabled; he says to invite them to dinner. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. . . 'hospitality' means, literally, 'love of a stranger.' Hospitality, then, is not having each other over on Friday evenings but welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return. Nor does the [story, sic] speak of sending food to anyone; rather, the host and the guest sit at table together. The clear sign of acceptance, of recognizing others as one's equals, of cementing fellowship, is breaking bread together. In the Christian community no one is a 'project' . . . the parable may be heard as a prophetic word of Jesus to a church rapidly becoming 'the establishment,' uttering pious phrases, comfortable in a false confidence of its own salvation, and no longer inviting to God's table the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind."

When we were in seminary in the late '70's and early '80's, the controversial issue before the General Assembly was welcoming baptized children to the Lord's table. Many people thought (and perhaps some still do) that children aren't able to

understand what goes on during communion. But I think they can. Over the years, as I have met with children and the parents to talk about the meaning of the sacrament, I have asked the families to think of a special meal in their family's life: What is the occasion? What special foods are served? What special guests are there? What traditions are maintained? Why is the meal so special? Then we talk about how and why the Lord's supper is a special meal for the family of God, as we answer the same questions about our church family's special feast.

If Jesus' parable about "the great dinner" gives us a glimpse of what God's heavenly feast will be like – especially who will be sitting at the table – then maybe the feast that is spread before us this morning can be something of a parable about the church. Who is invited to this table? If the "someone who gave a great dinner" can be thought of as Jesus, that would make us the servants who are sent out to invite people to the feast. How big is our invitation list? Do we throw open the doors and welcome anyone and everyone? Or, as Fred Craddock puts it so honestly, are we "a church rapidly becoming 'the establishment,' uttering pious phrases, comfortable in a false confidence of its own salvation, and no longer inviting to God's table the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind"?

A minister new to our presbytery recently told Nancy she was amazed at how much food was put on the tables at church covered dish dinners – "Even in the smallest churches!" she said. We love to eat around the table at the church, and there's something very elementary and satisfying about sitting at the table with the people of God. Remember what Acts 2 says? "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

As we come to our Lord's table this morning, let us eat "with glad and generous hearts," let us praise God, and let us think about what it means for our church to sit at table in the kingdom of God, not just in the future, but each and every day.

Here's another hymn from *Glory to God*. It's just one verse, but it's a powerful verse about feasting as the people of God:

*The bread and the wine are here; the feast is here.
Come now, all who hunger and thirst.
Come needy; come now without fear.
Drink joy, as the last become first!
Come in; sit down; there's room at the table;
enjoy the feast love has spread for you.*

Friends, this is the table of the Lord. Come to the feast which Jesus has prepared.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you sent your Son as a model of hospitality and ministry. May we have the courage to walk in his ways and serve your people. Prepare our hearts to love the people we meet.

Give us eyes to see their needs and gifts, and grace to respond lovingly to each person; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 178, 180.