

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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August 29, 2010  
Dinner Party Etiquette  
Proverbs 25: 6-7, Luke 14: 1, 7-14

One of the images of heaven is a great big banquet. The banquet hall goes on for as far as your eyes can see in every direction. The tables are laden with beautiful, mouth watering, delicacies. The tables are large and the chairs are very comfortable. The table cloths, dishes and goblets sparkle and the decorations are breath taking. It is simply the most amazing place.

Now imagine the people. Family and friends, and even many strangers, people of every size, shape, color, nationality, gender, and ethnicity, but somehow you recognize them all. They are dressed in fine clothes. They are all smiling and laughing and enjoying themselves. And there is music playing that blends in with all the conversation but creates an atmosphere of peace and festivity. It is a party, a celebration of life and love.

Everyone is here, everyone received an invitation, everyone is welcome, and everyone came. Everyone here is dressed in fine clothes, they are all healthy and whole and happy. There is more than enough food for everyone to eat. Everyone is present and joyous and fully accepted as a full relative in the family of God.

Now imagine instead the gathering Jesus was invited to. Our scripture says they were watching him. This was not a welcoming place but a hostile one. He

watches them. He notices who the host welcomes effusively; people with prestige and power. The people he threw the party to be seen with. Jesus notices who the host merely says hello to; people who have much less status and have no ability to help him climb the social/political ladder. The people he had to invite.

Jesus watches what they do. They posture and position and maneuver themselves to get to sit next to the host, in the best seat, where they can be seen, the head table where the best food will be served and the deals will be made. They cluster in cliques of power and influence. They look warily around them to see who is watching them and who they need to watch out for. Only the most important people can be welcomed into their circle; and the ones they can manipulate and use to get what they want.

There are no unwanted people among them. No people who are poor, physically diseased or disabled, and certainly no admission of hunger or loneliness. But in reality they are all diseased and disabled, poor and hungry and lonely. Everyone here will have more than enough to eat and drink, and companionship. But so many stand outside the door looking in, uninvited or and welcomed. There are many who are not present, and those who are, are certainly not joyous.

Jesus was a prophet and a visionary. He saw things others could not see. He knew a perspective that others do not know. He created among the people he walked with, a new reality, a new vision that they came to believe not just with

their minds but with their hearts and souls. A reality they believed in that they worked with their bodies and lived their lives to bring about. Jesus lived the first image, the heavenly banquet, where every person is a beloved child of God, everyone is welcomed, all are whole and healthy, and God's abundance is shared.

Now remember that Jesus had no home and no resources. We have no stories of him throwing a lavish dinner party. He only told stories about them! As far as we know he was a peasant, and an itinerant preacher who enjoyed the hospitality of others. Yet people welcomed him, not because he provided dinner, but a different kind of food. He fed their souls with a vision of life lived in God's Way, he fed their minds with understanding of God's abundance, and he fed their hearts by loving them as they had never been loved before, with God's pure love.

He invited and welcomed them all. He did not choose who he invited by who they were or what they could do for him. He did not invite the rich and powerful and prestigious. He invited those who needed God. Jesus not did want anything from the people who came. When they came they were healed and fed and loved, and they opened their hearts and became part of the community, part of the vision, part of God's Way. He invited them so he could give to them.

I was invited to give a presentation at a celebration. A group had chosen a new leader. They were celebrating a new start and hoped it would help them grow again. Since I was a VIP, when I arrived I was greeted effusively and ushered into

reserved seat in the audience. I noticed other Non-VIPs were not welcomed or ushered.

After the formal presentation time, I, the stranger, turned to introduce myself to people. I found out that the woman sitting next to me has been angry the whole time. It seems they had reserved her usual seat for me. All but three of the people around me left without a word, a smile or a glance to go to the banquet in the hall.

There was a long line for the food, and people were piling up their plates. I “made friends” with the people in line. By the time the people at the end of the line got there, most of the food was gone. When my new “friends” and I went to find a seat, their friends had reserved a seat for them, and all the other seats were taken. I sat at a table where children had been, but were now off playing. Their mothers came and cleaned up their plates but did not talk to me. I was a VIP! I certainly didn’t feel welcomed. I didn’t stay long, and wouldn’t go back. I doubt the Non-VIPs would either.

But I do know a story of welcome. A man and his wife felt a call to serve dinner to the homeless. They borrowed the church kitchen and started cooking. At first it was such a big job they invited friends and members of the church to help. After a while, there were so many people cooking and serving the meals, there was nothing to do. So Mark and Joan started greeting people who came for dinner, and brought them desert. After a while there were so many volunteers there was

nothing to do. So Mark and Joan went and sat with people. They served in a new way, listening and learning names and stories of individuals: Mary, John and Barb.

Then Joan was diagnosed and treated for cancer. She could not be around people, so Mark and Joan had to stop going to the homeless dinners for six months. After a valiant fight, Joan died. A friend asked him if he would come back to help serve the homeless. But Mark was grieving, he did not have the energy to serve.

Months went by and Mark decided he should start getting back to life and what better way than to serve the homeless. But he got a big surprise. Mark did not get to cook and serve food, or greet and bring desert, or sit and listen to the homeless. Instead, Mary and John and Barb came and greeted, served, sat and listened to him. He had come to serve the humble but was humbled by their service, and the friendship and love and welcome they showed to him.

Mark did not wait have to wait for his heavenly reward. Just as God's banquet is here and now, the reward for inviting and welcoming others, loving and sharing with others, is here and now. The reward is relationship with each other, knowing and loving our selves, and feeling God's presence in every moment.

We too have been invited to the glorious banquet of God, not in some future time after we die. It is already here and now. God has poured out God's blessings among us. We have already received everything we need in abundance. We have already been experiencing the heavenly banquet here. We have been healed and

fed and loved and when we opened our hearts, we became part of the community, part of the vision, part of God's Way. God invited us so God could give to us.

God invited and welcomed us all. God did not choose us because of who we were in the community or what we could do for God. God does not invite the rich and powerful and prestigious. God invites those who need God.

We have been invited, and we have received the largess of the banquet. We have been handed invitations to share with others. What will we do with those invitations? Who will we invite that we want nothing from, so that God can give to them what God has already given to us?