April 19: Mosaic Table (Luke 14:15-24)
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Welcome to our final "At the Table" sermon, which will conclude our Lenten and Easter series about moments in our spiritual history where God and humanity come together around the table. Each Sunday this season we've studied passages that invite us into different experiences at the table, and explored how we can be transformed by God's grace and abundance, and today, we'll imagine what God's ideal dinner party might look like. Please pray with me before we jump in.

Hospitable God, thank you for inviting us to your table and telling us we belong. May we be emboldened to take your message of inclusion and belonging with us and live it out it with all we encounter. May we model your mosaic table in our own church and our own lives. May your kingdom come here on earth, as it is in heaven. In the name of your Son Jesus, Amen.

Next Sunday, April 26, the President and First Lady will host King Charles and Queen Camilla of the United Kingdom for a state dinner at the White House. A state dinner isn't just any meal – it's an official event honoring a visiting head of state or reigning monarch, and requires months of careful preparation. According to the White House history website, a state dinner doesn't just seal a friendship by breaking bread together; it "showcases global power and influence…Behind the festive exterior of the social scene, the important business of government goes on—information is gathered, opinions are exchanged, powerful connections are made, and appearances are upheld."[1]

Everything about a state dinner is carefully orchestrated to achieve a purpose. The list of invitees is tremendously important, because the White House wants to show off tables of people who are prominent and beautiful and talented and influential – they represent America to the world leader. Where the guests are seated is also important, since proximity to the president and First Lady communicates and bestows power. White House invitations are the most important and the most sought after in Washington, and when an uninvited couple crashed Obama's first state dinner in 2009, it was a nationwide scandal. On the flip side, unless there's a death in the family or a serious illness, refusing a White House state dinner invitation is a serious social and political offense.

[1] https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-white-house-state-dinner

The world leader who gets honored at a state dinner isn't just there to enjoy the food and entertainment; there are unwritten rules to such an occasion, and they know they are expected to reciprocate with loyalty, aligning themselves with American interests and acting on behalf of the US. The most recent US state dinner honored Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and during that glamorous meal of glittering and influential attendees, Trump designated Saudi Arabia as a major non-NATO ally, and the crown prince announced that he was increasing Saudi investment in the US to a trillion dollars. Dinner mission accomplished.

Of course, the United States isn't the only nation or culture to instrumentalize meals, using them as public barometers of status and tools of social control, politics, and soft power. In the Greco-Roman culture of Jesus' time, wealthy people did the same thing. Elite members of society – those who could afford to host banquets – carefully chose guests with high social honor and influence, whose presence would increase the host's own honor. Guests were honored by receiving invitations, and they knew they were expected to reciprocate with an action or gift that would further boost their host. In other words, meals both showcased and reinforced the existing social hierarchy.

And even though the menu and entertainment of these strategic meals would have been different in Jewish communities, the same unwritten rules of honor, status, and reciprocity applied, along with an extra layer of rules and expectations about purity. Elite Jewish hosts would not invite or include anybody considered "unclean" by Jewish law and tradition, since these guests carried the weight of societal shame, and their presence would decrease the host's honor and status.

This is the kind of meal that Jesus found himself invited to in Luke 14, the chapter our passage today comes from – verse 1 says that "one Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being closely watched." It's a little surprising that Jesus was included on a guest list that would have been full of the wealthy and important Jewish members of the community, although the last part of that verse gives us a clue – "he was being closely watched." Perhaps the elite leaders included Jesus so they could keep tabs on, surveil, maybe even figure out a man they were intrigued and threatened by. And Jesus sure gave them something to talk about! In verses 1-24, Jesus treated his privileged tablemates to four different "courses" of radical actions, advice, and parables about eating together that challenged them, shamed them, and called them to a new imagination about what a banquet is like when God hosts it.

Course #1 featured a surprise guest: a man who was sick with dropsy, which means that his whole body was abnormally swollen – a symptom arising from an underlying condition like heart, liver, or kidney failure. It's unclear how this "unclean" man was able to crash a formal dinner held by a religious elite, but it's quite possible he was brought in as a plant, to test whether or not Jesus would break the Sabbath by healing him.

And not only did Jesus immediately heal the man and send him on his way; he shamed the religious leaders at the table by pointing out their hypocrisy, asking them if they would hesitate to rescue one or their children or even an animal who fell in a well on the Sabbath. No one had the guts to answer, and in the uncomfortable silence that followed, Jesus moved into course #2.

He had been taking note of how the dinner guests jostled for positions of honor at the table, and he told them a parable about a wedding feast where those who grabbed the best positions were humbled and sent to the lowest places at the table, while those who took the lowest places were brought forward and honored in front of all the other guests. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled," Jesus announced to the guests, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Humility was not a virtue in Greek culture, but Jesus lifted it up as something to be desired and lived out.

And then, having confronted the guests with their own self-serving pride, Jesus turned his attention to his host for course #3 of his table talk – and this time, the guest list itself was on the menu. "When you give a luncheon or dinner," Jesus counseled, "do not invite your friends, your brothers or sister, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid." This probably sounded like baffling advice, because if a wealthy host ignored their family, friends, and peers, who was left to invite? "But when you give a banquet," Jesus continued, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

This is pretty radical advice for any context and culture. My guess is that when any of us put together a guest list for a party or a special event, we focus on family, friends and neighbors – it's the natural thing to do. But in Jesus' culture, it wasn't just natural, it was strategic; because the guests you invited into your home marked who you were in society – they broadcast your status and lifted you up the honor ladder so you had more influence and standing. Inviting the kind of people Jesus suggested – the poor and those with disabilities, who

were considered "unclean" by Jewish leaders – would mean social death. Not only could they not pay you back with reciprocal invitations or favors, but their very presence at your table would pull you down, dishonoring you in the eyes of society. Yet it was exactly those kinds of guests that Jesus said God valued, and inviting them to your house would give you honor and standing in the eyes of God, even as you lost it in the eyes of the world.

I don't think Jesus' tablemates knew how to respond at this point. Finally, one guest retreated into a pious and safe saying – "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). Perhaps he was trying to defuse the tension, moving the conversation from the very uncomfortable and concrete present to a future moment when God would reward faithful followers by including them at the great heavenly banquet Isaiah wrote about, when death would be swallowed up, tears erased, and enemies defeated; where God would prepare and serve a feast of rich food and the finest of wines. And by the assured way the man expressed his saying, it was pretty clear that he believed he would be one of those eating at that future table.

But Jesus didn't allow his comfortable assumption to pass unchallenged – instead, he used that man's trite phrase as the launching point for course #4: the passage we read this morning, which is often called the "parable of the Great Banquet." A parable is a memorable story with a deeper meaning, and Jesus' parables often started in a situation or setting the listeners were familiar with, where everything was going the way they expected it to – but then took the story around a sharp turn, surprising and amazing listeners and inviting them to ponder what it meant.

This parable began with a common situation: "a certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready'" (Luke 4:17). It's likely that everyone listening had hosted or attended a similar banquet. When a host planned his event, he would send out a first round of invitations and collect replies. Then, on the day of the banquet, he would send servants around with a second round of invitations, telling everybody who said they would come that all was ready for them. In Jesus parable, though, when the servant went around with the second round of invitations, he kept on getting last minute excuses about why each guest couldn't make it.

And just like a White House state dinner, refusing an invitation to a banquet, especially at the last minute after you said you would come, was only acceptable if you had a compelling reason. The excuses the guests at this banquet gave, though, were not compelling. They were exceedingly lame, lame enough that they compounded the offense of not attending. Make no mistake, this was a social attack on the host, and would have had a debilitating effect on his standing – his guests were seriously shaming him, and verse 21 says that he "became angry."

Now, up to this point, Jesus' parable has stayed within the boundaries of the listeners' social world. It's showcased some shocking antisocial behavior, but the host's reaction of anger was expected. Here, though, is where the whole narrative shifts in a radical way, because the host's anger didn't lead to revenge; instead, it was transformed into grace. Instead of working within the existing social system to punish those who snubbed him, the host rejected the system entirely, refusing to play by its games of exclusivity and reciprocity, its marking of insiders and outsiders. He sent his servant out with good news, instructing him to go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the very people that Jesus had said should be invited to banquets, the people with no power to reciprocate: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

The servant did this, but there was still room at the table. So the host sent him out again with a new set of instructions, to "go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so my house will be full" (Luke 14:23). This new group of people lived beyond the walls marking the border of the city: they were human beings who were utterly destitute, or not allowed to live within the city because they were considered unclean or immoral. Imagine the current White House filling the tables of a state dinner with invitees just booted from a local homeless encampment, inmates of the nearest ICE facility, people who depend on disability benefits, and a group of drag queens, and you'll get a picture of how unconventional this host's banquet guests were.

It's interesting that the first group of people in this parable, the rich elites who refused to attend, were "invited", while the second group was brought in, and this third group is *compelled* to come in. There's an intensity of pleading as the servant goes out to people further and further away from social acceptability. The word "compel" in this context doesn't mean they're being forced to come to the banquet, but it does suggest that it took some work to persuade these outsiders, who had been despised and rejected again and again, that they are truly welcome and would not be turned away in disgust.

The resulting banquet, with its mosaic tables full of society's misfits and outcasts, redefined what it meant to be an insider or an outsider and introduced a new world grounded in radical inclusivity and generous hospitality that expects nothing in return. And in his telling of this parable, Jesus insinuated that this was the kind of party God throws in heaven, *and* that those who embraced and joined in this kind of mosaic, grace-filled banquet were the ones who will be eat bread in the kingdom of heaven.

Sadly, we are not told how the banquet guests at this meal reacted to Jesus' parable (my guess is that Jesus didn't get invited to any more dinners), but we can put ourselves in their place and decide how we are called to respond as a community of Jesus-followers. What are we asked to believe, to do, and to hope for as we hear this story?

First, what's striking to me in the parable is that *everybody* is invited to the master's banquet, no matter who they are or where they are. Nobody is left out, and there's no shortage of room for all who are hungry. The master hunts down everyone, and the only thing needed in order to feast at the party is to say yes and come. Everybody belongs. That's pretty radical inclusivity. In her book *Searching for Sunday,* the late author Rachel Held Evans writes about this parable and says "This is what God's kingdom will look like, a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at the table, not because they are rich or popular or worthy or good, but because they are hungry."[2] And that is good news for each one of us, especially if we know the pain of rejection.

On the other hand, the sobering part of this parable is that those who refuse the invitation don't make it to the table – they have the freedom to stay away. The host won't force them to accept the grace that is extended. Coming to the table means being willing to sit with those who have been gathered from the margins, and Jesus suggests that it's much harder for those who have riches, power, and influence to accept the gift of sitting at the heavenly banquet, than it is for those they labeled as outsiders. As Jesus tells us this parable, he nudges us to think about which group we find ourselves in: those who refuse the invitation, or those who come to God's mosaic table to join the feast.

And speaking of invitations, I think that we who already identify as part of the host's household might be called to do the work of the servant: to carry the good news out past physical and societal borders and invite people to come join us at the table; not as an act of charity, but because we want to broaden it, to fill the extra space.

[2] Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (2015), p.47.

And just like the servant had to work harder and harder to persuade the people who had been pushed further and further towards the margins to attend, we must accept that it takes hard work to create spaces of true inclusion. Telling somebody that they belong isn't enough. We need to listen to what belonging means for those who have been rejected because of who they are or what they look like, and then make sure our own table and environment communicates belonging. This might mean making sure things are fully accessible, speaking in a way that expresses belonging for those who are listening, and accepting feedback, even when it's hard, and learning from it.

I found it surprisingly difficult to find artistic portrayals of the Great Banquet – perhaps it's difficult to imagine what the mosaic table Jesus describes in his parable might actually look like. But I did want to share a couple that caught my imagination. This first one was commissioned by Joni and Friends, a community that advocates for people with disabilities. I love way that this picture shows how a true mosaic table will be a little bit chaotic, and will be configured in a way that accommodates everybody. There's even a dog!

This picture, painted in 1973 by the Jesus MAFA community in Cameroon, is a very different portrayal of the Great Banquet in a rural African context. In it, the whole compound is the banqueting hall, and you can see people being ushered in from the outside. I love all the little groups, the many ages, the welcome as people come in, and the joy on the faces. What do you think a mosaic table would look like in the city of Bremerton?

I believe that Jesus' whole table talk in Luke 14 challenges us, as individuals and as a church, to think about whether the tables we eat at look like the mosaic table Jesus describes in his parable, or whether we stay in the comfortable rut of eating all of our meals with our friends, relatives, and peers. A true mosaic table is always countercultural, as much in our own time as it was when Jesus lived, which means it doesn't come naturally, and it will take intentionality. But when we model a messy mosaic table filled with those who have nothing in common except for our shared need for food and grace and belonging, and when we sit down at that table and accept that we are just one of the many oddballs gathered together there, we embody a different kind of power than the White House projects with its glittering state dinners. We offer the world a glimpse of what eating together in heaven is going to look like, and we are blessed, just like the dinner guest said in our passage today, blessed to be the ones who are eating and will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.