

What if No One Came?

Luke 14:15-24

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First Central Congregational UCC
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What if you threw a dinner party and no one came?

And, in particular, what if you were intentionally snubbed? For what happens to the would-be-host in Jesus' parable is a public shaming. For some reason, untold in the story, polite society chooses to snub and shame this man.

Edith Wharton, in her great novel *The Age of Innocence*, grapples with the power of shame and honor. The Countess Olenska wants to divorce her reprobate husband, but high New York Society in the 19th century will not accept her decision. When her grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, the matriarch of a powerful and rich family, sides with her granddaughter and invites society to a party to welcome her home, she is shocked when polite society sends their regrets. The novel is a reminder of the power of shame used by society to control people's behaviour.

Jesus' parable also exists within a framework of honor and shame yet works to subvert its destructive power. We live in very different times, when the destructive power of public shame has been weakened. Maybe this is because the once radical notions of this parable have permeated our culture. The surprising legacy of this would-be-host and his imaginative response is a different world.

For what the host does is imaginative, ingenious, and beautiful. He chooses to actively invite dishonor and more shame by inviting to his table those who no one in polite society ever would. He first invites in the poor and disabled. But, a benefactor or philanthropist might do even this on occasion. This host does an even more radical thing. He sends his servants out to go invite anyone to his table. It is this radical invitation of everyone and anyone that invites further shame and dishonor, for you have no idea who might show up -- the local drunk, a prostitute, a pornographer—use your imagination.

And this is what the kingdom of God is like.

One of the outreach missions of this church is CrossOver Prison Ministries. It has been led through much of its history by our own Jeannie Bates, and members of this church have participated in the organization as volunteers or on the board of directors. CrossOver ministers to inmates and their families with a variety of programs. One of their primary aims is to assist people as they re-enter society. CrossOver's recidivism rate is significantly below the national average.

They also advocate for inmates, correspond with them, and supply Christmas gifts to their children. They, we, also lead worship and bible study for prisoners, both inside and outside the prison. Every Monday night, for prisoners who can leave the facility, there is a

meal, bible study, prayer, and support at First Christian Church. And once a quarter, worship is provided inside the Omaha Correctional Center. This last Monday was Worship Inside, and it was my first time to lead the study.

Rick Brenneman transported me and Allison Newland, it was also Allison's first time. When we arrived at the prison, we met other volunteers and waited to be processed. Eventually we were patted down and then escorted through the heavy doors to the chapel, where we spent two hours with a handful of inmates. I shared the same sermon you heard last week, about the mustard seed and the leaven, and how Jesus proclaimed that these things which were wild, obnoxious, forbidden, impure, unclean, and corrupted could actually represent the kingdom of God. In the discussion that followed, one inmate said, "I'm mustard seed and leaven—wild and unwanted. And God can be present in me."

Jesus teaches us to include everyone in the communion of God. This compels us to acts of charity, helping the needy. But I don't think Jesus' primary concern was teaching us to be benevolent and do good deeds for others. He assumed those things were the basis of any ethical or religious life.

What Jesus wanted was even more than that. Real relationships with those who are normally excluded and looked down upon. Living in solidarity with them. Learning from them.

One of the truths that was revealed to me when I organized and led my first youth mission trip as a youth minister in the early Aughts was that the real point of the trip was not so much the help we provided to others, but the eye-opening lessons we learned from them.

Jesus wants to bring us in contact with the poor, the disabled, the people on the street, the shamed and dishonored, because it is our contact with those other people which will save us.

These lessons are not new or surprising for you. Here at First Central and in the United Church of Christ we have, for a long time, understood the radically inclusive call of Jesus and its power to save.

I've been reading Anne Lamott's *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. It has surprised me that pretty much every week one of her stories complements the parables I've been studying. I've resisted overusing them as sermon illustrations, but I find that some of Lamott's stories do work similarly to Jesus' stories. They share in common an appreciation for God in the ordinary and awkward things and an overwhelming reliance upon grace.

In one of her stories, she introduces us to David Roche, a religious speaker who was born with a major facial disfigurement that was made worse by the doctors who tried to fix it when he was a child. His disfigurement, of course, could have been a source of shame, because people treated him differently. But over time, he came to understand his disfigurement as a gift, because it awakened him to true grace.

And part of that grace was learning to accept the good efforts people make. David Roche founded what he called the church of 80% sincerity, because he thought that 80% sincerity is pretty good and about as good as it gets. 80% compassion as well. Anne Lamott records his thoughts on unconditional love, "unconditional love is a reality, but with a shelf life of about eight to ten seconds. Instead of beating yourself up because you feel it only fleetingly, you should savor those moments when it appears."

Anne Lamott finds this incredibly refreshing; she writes,

When David insists you are fine exactly the way you are, you find yourself almost believing him. When he talks about unconditional love, he gives you a new lease on life, because the way he explains it, you may, for the first time, believe that even you could taste of this.

If only for eight or ten seconds.

Having the grace to accept himself, David then found the grace to share with other people. He says,

I've been forced to find my inner beauty. Doing that gave me a deep faith in myself. Eighty percent of the time. And that faith has been a window, so I can see the beauty in you, too. The light in your eyes. Your warmth. So thank you.

The would-be-host in Jesus' parable offers us a different world. It doesn't matter if you throw a dinner party and no one comes. Whatever would shame you, claim it and turn it on its head, imagine new possibilities, and create something new and different. Be like the inmate who identified with the mustard seed and the leaven, with what was unwanted and despised, and thereby experienced the presence of God in himself. Or like David Roche, find your inner beauty by savoring those eight to ten seconds of life when you are your very best.

Jesus, in his parables, does not dream of a future kingdom of God when everyone will miraculously live with each other in peace, love, and understanding. That's a great dream, and it often animates our hopes and our courage. But it is not what Jesus in his parables proclaims the kingdom of God to be. The imagery of the parables is something else.

The kingdom of God is right here and right now. In you. Just the way you are. You need to awaken to it. Forgive yourself. Love yourself. Be gracious to yourself. And allow that grace to overflow toward others.

And don't sweat it if you are only good at that for eight or ten seconds at a time.