

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Luke 14 12-24

This morning wraps up our stewardship theme for this year. We have talked with and thought through agricultural imagery. We began reassessing, talking about the work of pruning and amending and cutting back, choices made with anticipation of greater and better fruit, with the expectation of a healthier vine. We talked of reconnecting, getting the energy and wherewithal to reinvest, and starting sowing seeds again, and doing the things that might give those seeds the best chance. Last week we talked of recommitting, of the harvest being an endeavor that invites us all to come together around. So, as we come together around the call and task to bear the fruit of God's kingdom in our own lives and in our church community, we talk about reimagining.

Why reimagining? Because imagination has to do with coming to the same task but with fresh eyes, ideas, energy. It has to do with coming to the same task with the same call and impulse, but the flexibility for God to lead in new ways and let it take shape in new ways.

I made the connection at the start of stewardship with the potluck dinners we held this fall around Appreciative Inquiry. I mention it again for Appreciative Inquiry is not some scheme for growing your church in seven simple steps or any such thing. It is a mode of listening to one another to get back to a sense of who we are as an organization. It is about identifying things like the positive core, like strengths. Because The person tending the vineyard must understand their job to care for the vine primarily, for a healthy vine can grow new branches. The steward must understand the relationship between the vine and the branches. Because the working assumption is that if an organization gets in touch with its identity and strengths, core, the main trunk, new imagination, energy, and ideas will flow more naturally.

Well, our gospel reading this morning is as not as directly agricultural, though it is, like a thanksgiving meal with friends and family, a type of celebration of the harvest and blessing. Jesus tells a parable about someone that hosts a great dinner. In Matthew's version of this parable, he adds that "Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready." This is the sense. This person has prepared a great banquet with produce and roasted animals, and he has invited his friends and community to come to celebrate with him. The food is all ready, the house prepared.

This person now sends his servants out to tell his guests that the banquet is ready. And who got invited? Not everybody. Because there is a social structure in the parable, an economic and social hierarchy at play. This structure gives an order to this person's life and ways of moving about in the world. At the top of this social structure are the wealthiest and most connected, who invite each other to their dinner parties, their kids' weddings, and other significant events. They host each other in their homes, do business deals together, and look out for each other. They are the type who host their own banquets and weddings, have servants and hired help, and have the means to buy more land or invest in more oxen. Not, as we learn, the poor, nor the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

The poor, crippled, blind, and lame are not in view in the story at first. Their stories are obscured. We do not really know their stories, where they live, how they get by. We don't know if their challenges are generational or if some sudden catastrophic turn has determined the trajectory of their story. And these do not get invited to the same dinners and events for several reasons. One, they can't reciprocate. They have nothing to pledge at a fundraiser. They don't have homes nor the means. And no one would want to come to their homes as they are stigmatized. They are unwhole and, therefore, unholy. There is something wrong with them. The perception is that they are different, accursed, contagious, and victims of their own choices or of God's displeasure.

Why are the poor, crippled, blind, and lame highlighted in this parable? Why does Jesus say to people at the start of our passage that when they host a dinner and assign seats of honor, they should invite those that can't reciprocate, that they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? For one, it sounds outlandish and unrealistic and is an excellent setup for a parable. It gets one's attention. But it also gets at the way they see their world and operate according to it without questioning it. And it gets at the way Jesus' ministry, the way the kingdom of God, redraws lines, reimagines community and connection. So, it is no coincidence that Jesus tells them to invite the unclean, the stigmatized, all those excluded from social gatherings and from temple worship.

Well, everything is proceeding normally in the village of our parable until the house is ready and the smell of roast is wafting through the windows. Until the servants return from spreading the word that all is ready and report after report says no one is coming. One has purchased land that he never checked out beforehand and is now just getting to. Perhaps he's planning a retirement home or a vacation cabin. The other has bought oxen, and he must go try them out without being unable to rest from his own business ventures. The third has gotten married

and had his own celebration and is snubbing this invitation. The owner of this house has spent days and resources preparing the house, and in the culture at play, not responding to the invitation is an insult, a slap-in-the-face, a snub. While these may all be important matters to attend to, in the context of an honor-shame culture, these excuses are as believable and acceptable as "the dog ate my homework." The house is empty; his person and his house are being disdained, shamed, and embarrassed, and he is hurt and angry.

What has happened? Has he offended unknowingly, has he fallen from grace, has he been demoted socially, and is just finding out now? Or is the culture changing? Maybe the old values and protocols have been eroded. There was a time, he may be thinking, that when someone invited you to a banquet that you cleared the schedule and you came, no excuses. There was a time when friendships and relationships were more highly valued. But now, the old protocols have broken down. The families are all at sports practices, and the young people are all off rock climbing, and others are doing their grocery shopping or going to the gym in the prime hours of a Sunday morning, and the church no longer has clout or respect, and people drive by without looking or considering. But I digress.

Something has changed for the man of this parable. His invitation is shunned. His spread of food grows cold. His embarrassment grows. So how will he respond? What is his reaction? And what will he do with this spread of food? Will he resend invitations? Will he go door to door to plead with them? Will he send the servants a second or third time to gather the community to fill his house? Will he create a survey to get data on these changes? Will he create charts and graphs and PowerPoint presentations or register for weekend seminars on how to woo and impress the very people who have snubbed him?

Well, he does not send out more invitations to his original guest list. It is done. The order has ruptured, and he will not attempt to restore it. He gets a little ticked, in fact. The owner of the house became angry. Now we don't always do our best thinking or imagining when we are hurt and angry. But, what is notable is that the owner of the house accepts the changes. He does not live in denial. He does not drag on with the hopes of getting the same friends back. And yet, he remains determined to share his banquet meal and to have his house filled. So, he reimagines how to do it. He does not keep trying to get the same people to come when it is clear they are not interested. He reimagines how to use his resources and social connections.

So, he will send out another round of invitations. But he sends the servants this time to everyone else who was not on the first guest list, though it will take two

rounds. This host, like all his friends, is so accustomed to passing over this type that he is not even sure who to invite or where to find them. Still, he obviously knows such people exist, and he is determined to fill his house. So, this host, whose life is disrupted, turns this disruption towards a new order, to inviting the unclean and under-resourced and the previously un-invited into his home to eat at his table.

As parables tend to work on exaggerated details, twists, and irony, it is interesting that it is in that moment of being passed over that the owner of the house becomes aware of those he has passed over till now. In his moment of shame and dishonor, he becomes cognizant of those shamed and passed over routinely. In his realization that he has not been invited to his friend's wedding celebration, he chooses to invite all those he has never thought to invite.

In the exaggerated events of the parable, there is a break. The starkness brings a type of clarity, clarity that would be harder to find if there was a mixed response. It's harder to know when to reimagine and start over then. But the stark response of his guest list makes the situation clear. And so, rather than operating by an expectation formed in the past, he reimagines how to fill his house and to utilize his full table. And in the exaggerated details and irony of the parable, this person will have his house filled. He will reestablish his honor, but it will be a strange type of honor, a house filled with unclean and unwhole people, many of whom do not know how to act at a banquet. His old friends will probably laugh at him all the more. And yet... and yet...

A new community is formed around the table. The social order upended. That is why Jesus tells this parable. Because he suggested at a dinner with a monolithic guest list, when he saw everyone playing their social games and seeking seats of honor. He suggested that they "give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." It is the upending of one order and the reimagining of a new one.

Now Jesus makes an issue of this for a good reason. Because the order around people's tables and communities reflects their perceptions of God's house and God's table. Jesus is reordering the conceptual framework of who belongs in God's kingdom and how we will relate to each other in that kingdom. The poor, crippled, blind, and lame were deemed as less than, as outside, as unclean needing to be changed before they could be restored to social life and religious life. Jesus confronts the social order because it is core to his religious vision, where there is

no hierarchy of who is welcome in God's presence, who is part of the community of faith, who is worthy of touch and grace and love.

So Jesus calls for his listeners to reimagine their dinners to reflect the kingdom of God more aptly. In doing so, he is expressing his own vision for his ministry and expressing the kingdom in ways that many will find objectionable and embarrassing. You see, he had a problem. His house was empty while his table was full of food. And so reimagines a solution to the problem. But what is more, through his reimagining, he also reimagines a community. Through this parable, Jesus is reimagining what it looks like to invite people into God's kingdom, what it looks like to reengage with God's heart working in a broken world, and what it means for their homes to reflect God's house.

You see, reimagining is not just practical work. It is theological work. It invites us to see how God is working and to participate anew in that work. If the owner of the house could not reimagine, a sad story it would have been.

As we reassess, reconnect, and recommit, we do so with an openness to the moment. Without assuming we know how things will go or how we need them to go, we reimagine how to be God's people in this place. We reimagine how we might reflect the kingdom of God, how we might bear the fruit of the kingdom of God.

As we bring our pledges this morning, we offer them to God with a sense of openness and anticipation, ready to reimagine how God might lead us. And why-again might we reimagine? It is not because we are bored, have an attention deficit, or just like to develop new ideas. But the time might call for it, even as it did in the parable. And we might come to a deeper experience of what it means to be God's people in the world, and to reflect God's kingdom, and to bear the fruit of the kingdom.

Therefore, bring your gifts, and let us celebrate the bounty of God's blessings, and follow God's lead as to who to share that bounty with. And all God's people said...Amen.

Luke 14:12-24

<sup>12</sup> He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

*The Parable of the Great Dinner*

*(Mt 22:1–14)*

<sup>15</sup> One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” <sup>16</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. <sup>17</sup> At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ <sup>18</sup> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ <sup>19</sup> Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ <sup>20</sup> Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ <sup>21</sup> So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ <sup>22</sup> And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ <sup>23</sup> Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. <sup>24</sup> For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’ ”