

“Gathering for the Feast”  
Isaiah 25:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-14  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
October 15, 2017  
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Both of today’s scripture lessons focus on dinner parties. They point to the importance of feasting, celebrating, gathering together at table, especially a table set by almighty God. The imagery reaches deep down in our hearts, as we remember Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas family gatherings, special meals and occasions that mark the highlights of our lives.

Eighteen years ago, Anne and I were married. We had started dating about fourteen months before, and we came to the relationship with two dogs, two cats, two fish and two guinea pigs. The guinea pigs were named Cinnamon and King Arthur. When we reached the joy of our wedding day, we came together with four beautiful children and two houses - and two kitchen tables.

Well, we did what you might expect. We prepared one of our homes for sale, sprucing up the interior and planting some beautiful mums in the front yard. We evaluated all of our furniture. Some we kept; some we gave away. We thought and planned and worked together. By the time our wedding day rolled around, we had just about the items we wanted to keep settled in our home.

One of the most important parts of our wedding day was the conversation we shared with our children that evening. We sat down with all of them together. We explained that Anne would have a new roommate and the same room, and that I would have a new roommate *and* a new room. Meredith would have a new roommate and the same room; Rachel would have a new roommate *and* a new room. Matt would have a new room. Laurel, the oldest, would not experience any changes – well, except for the challenge of now living with *three* younger siblings.

In the midst of all our thinking and planning, we had to make a choice about a kitchen table. Each of our two tables came with terrific memories. It was tough. But we finally decided on the one that seemed a little less rickety than the other.

It remains our kitchen table today. You can see the marks on one or two of the chairs from booster seats for the children. You can see the blemishes and spots that developed over the years. That table was the scene of lots of baby food feeding, lots of learning how to eat with a spoon, lots of adventures and fun and family talks. There was homework there, lots of homework. There was joy; there was laughter; there were tears at that table. Meal after meal, that table witnessed my eternal quest to encourage Meredith to eat green vegetables, any green vegetables, any at all. That table made us exceptionally grateful for our beagle, Maggie. She was the best kind of clean-up system under that table through all the frequent spills.

I expect it’s that way for you. Memories, cherished memories, surround your table. Through the beauty and the blemishes, there is deep joy and meaning.

It is much the same for Isaiah and Matthew today. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet declares, “The Lord will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine. God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples. The Lord will wipe away the tears from every face. God will swallow up death forever.”

The opening of Matthew’s Gospel is not dissimilar. Jesus announces the reign of God is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. After an initial disappointment with the invited guests (who don’t bother to show up), the king tells his servants, “Go to the streets and invite everyone – everyone – to the wedding banquet.”

In both lessons, the table is set. Everyone, all of us, are welcomed to enjoy a wonderful feast from the hands of almighty God.

The framing of these stories helps us to see ourselves. All that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. God welcomes us, God celebrates with us, without precondition or qualification. The grace of election is exactly that: a free gift of grace.

It is hard, though, for us to see our lives truly. We think we are what we eat, we are what we earn, we are what we achieve, we are what we accomplish. We think it is all up to us, and we overlook everything that points beyond *me* to God's mercy and love and tender care. We miss the grace of every moment.

Agnes Norfleet, a seminary classmate, pointed to this in a recent sermon, when she shared the experience of James Autry, a poet and author. James Autry was facing heart bypass surgery. His loved ones had told him that the experience would be radical, that he would become more spiritual. "In other words," he wrote with considerable doubt, "the doctors would stop my heart, re-route some arteries, and restart a man more aware of his mortality and more inspired to see himself on a path to heaven." He dismissed this counsel of his friends. He insisted his focus was on getting through the experience and back to a life that was already in fine shape, thank you very much.

After five days in the hospital, he came back home thinking he had not experienced any profound change. But something then began to take place, something hard to explain and express. "I awoke from a nap on that first day home," he wrote, "and I found the world around me transformed. The afternoon light was slanting into the room, catching the [beauty of] the flowers, intensifying the colors. The room glowed. I had looked across this room a thousand times and never seen this glow.

"A similar phenomenon occurred the next day when Beethoven's Sixth Symphony came on. The music, like the light the day before, was richer, more intense. I could feel it in my body, more than through my ears, as if I was absorbing it somehow. Coming face-to-face with my own mortality lifted the veil, made vivid the sacred hues and notes that had surrounded me unnoticed for years . . . I felt connected with something much greater than myself, with the music and the light as forces beyond how we usually identify them, as I might say, as manifestations of God. I was suddenly feeling so grateful."

God invites each of us to this banquet of colors and sounds. God invites every person to the rich experience of grace and forgiveness and love.

But that is not the end of the story. The transformation of grace calls forth changes within us, that we enact and we choose.

The king, the host of the wedding banquet, looks over all the guests and sees one who is not appropriately dressed. That person he casts out into the darkness.

Wait a minute, we think. If all is grace, if our invitation is God's free gift, why does the Lord react so negatively to this individual's attire at the wedding feast?

Here John Calvin is a help to us. As Andrew Purves points out, Calvin directs our attention to two passages from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In Romans, Paul writes, "Lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." And in Galatians, Paul writes, "If you were baptized into Christ, you have clothed yourselves with Christ."

In other words, having been freely and fully welcomed into God's grace and favor, we must clothe ourselves with love and joy and peace and patience, kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. We simply cannot continue to live lives of jealousy, anger, lust and greed, and expect God to turn a blind eye. We must "clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:16)

This is covenantal theology, revealed throughout both the Old and New Testaments. The initiative in our spiritual lives lies with God. God freely welcomes, offering grace to all without measure or precondition. But to participate in this covenant of grace is to respond with dedication and commitment, living a life that reflects giving and forgiving, sharing and caring, proclaiming the good news of the gospel and working for justice and peace.

We cannot be passive.

God's love is the foundation, the power, the transformation that works within and through us, changing our perspectives, helping us to see and understand ourselves as if for the very first time. Love is also the guide, the lifestyle, the rubrics and values by which we live. It is not only the bedrock on which we stand, but also the direction in which we move.

Years ago, Garrison Keillor read a poem on the Writer's Almanac, written by Alden Nowlan, a poem entitled, "He Attempts to Love His Neighbors." Part of the poem goes like this:

"Love interrupts dinner,  
interferes with mowing the lawn, washing the car or walking the dog.  
Love is a telephone ringing or a doorbell waking you  
moments after you have finally succeeded in getting to sleep."

We follow Jesus only as we walk the way of Love.

I pray that at your table – and at every table – you experience the open welcome and overflowing goodness of God's tender mercy. And in turn, I pray that you find the strength and courage in Christ's name to get up from that table, to interrupt your dinner, to answer the phone or the door, to welcome the stranger and forgive your adversary and give yourself up and over and away.

I pray that love may become not only the great gift you experience from God's hands, but also the story of your life, your energy, your vocation, your generosity, your care.

To the glory of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.