

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

A SERMON FOR COMMUNION SUNDAY

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Twenty one years ago this past week, Hurricane Andrew blazed a path of destruction across South Florida. Then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton toured the destruction, and promised if elected to do all that he could to help those who had lost homes and businesses in places like Homestead to rebuild.

A year later, twenty years ago this week, President Bill Clinton returned to South Florida, to see what had been done as a part of that recovery effort.

The man who chaired the pulpit committee that took me to Arcadia, Florida, Mike Pooser, was what we used to call a Yellow Dog Democrat. That means that he would vote for a yellow dog if it was running as a Democrat. His wife, my second mama, Doris, answered to the nickname of Dodo. Somehow, Dodo had been an alternate delegate to the 1992 Democratic convention in New York City. She met Hillary Clinton at a Democratic Women's caucus in NYC. When Bill and Hillary Clinton came back to Florida in 1993, she and Mike got tickets to a reception in their honor at the Fontainebleau Hotel on Miami Beach. Four tickets.

Mike called me up, told me he was having trouble driving after dark, and asked if Polly and I would like to go with them. I would drive, and he'd pick up all the expenses. Well, I'd never been to a reception at the Fontainebleau, and I'd never got to meet a President of the United States, so, we went.

As the hour for the arrival of the President came, they began to line up the people in the room as a receiving line. The U.S. Senators, the Governor, the Congressmen, were up front by the double doors. Then came the State Legislators, and the Miami/Dade County officials, and then all of the other elected officials who were there. Mike and Dodo and Polly and I kept moving further and further back, until we were the last people in the line. We were standing right in front of this little narrow door that opened into a service corridor where the waiters and bus boys hustled back and forth.

About a half hour after the President was due to arrive, that back door opened and a big black man stepped through it, and announced, "Ladies and gentleman, the President of the United States William Jefferson Clinton and the First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton." And as the applause began, Hillary stepped through the door and exclaimed, "Oh, Dodo, it's so good to see you again!"

Now you may think that proves the old adage from scripture that the last shall be first and the first last (Matthew 20:16). And indeed it does. But it also demonstrates the point of the parable that Jesus tells here in Luke's gospel. Can you imagine the embarrassment, the chagrin, of those people who had jockeyed for position, who had pushed and shoved, who had said "excuse me, excuse me" as they pushed by the Lands and the Poosers to get ahead in the line?

We had humbled ourselves, and I guess we were exalted, because we were the ones whose pictures were on the front page of the newspapers, and who appeared in the television news clips of the arrival of the President and First Lady at the Fontainebleau.

This section of Luke's gospel is filled with images of the great banquet, the heavenly feast. In 13:29, Jesus says, "Then people will come from east and west and from north and south and will eat in the kingdom of God." I say those words, or some version of them, as part of the invitation to the Lord's Table almost every time we have communion. And indeed, from north and south and east and west we have come together today to be at the Lord's Table. We are truly in the kingdom of God when we come to the table, but it is just a dim shade of what the table will be like, and where the people will come from to be at the table in the kingdom of God.

After the part about being humbled and exalted, Jesus gave instructions about who is to be invited to the luncheon or dinner. And it is contrary to what we would normally do. Why, when we have a luncheon or a dinner, we want to invite our family and friends. Jesus tells us to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and in so doing we will be blessed.

Now sometimes, when we have a church supper or a luncheon after church, folks will show up unexpectedly. They may be homeless. They may be hungry. They may be poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And we are not to turn them away, but to invite them to the table, and we will be blessed, and our payment, or repayment for our generosity, will be at the resurrection of the righteous. And, if I read Matthew 25:31-46 correctly, those who don't invite those folks in, those who turn them away, will get their payment to, and the judgment of the unrighteous.

Finally, in Luke 14:15-24, the passage that immediately follows our lesson this morning, Jesus tells the story of the great banquet, of the host who invited guests. Let me just read it for you.

This passage is a judgment upon the nation of Israel, those who God had invited to worship and serve in the kingdom, and who had rejected time and time again that invitation. But it is also a judgment upon those in the present age, who hearing the call of Jesus to follow Him, choose not to.

The invitation, the altar call, is a part of the service in many churches, but not many Presbyterian churches practice it. We'll talk more about that next Sunday.

But every Sunday, we are invited to confess our faith with the Apostles Creed. And if we really mean those words, if we say them with our hearts and not just with our lips, then we are indeed affirming our faith, and responding to the invitation to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved.

And one Sunday a month, we are invited to the table, to the sacrament that makes us part of the Body of Christ in the world, to the meal that is eaten in the kingdom of God. Friends, this is the solemn and joyful feast of the people of God. This is the heavenly table spread for us. This is the marriage supper of the Lamb. This is where things are done on earth as they are in heaven.

Thanks be to God, for this inexpressible gift.