

“Where Will You Sit at the Banquet?”

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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*Vamos todos al banquete,
a la mesa de la creación;
cada cual con su taburete
tiene un puesto y una misión.*

*Hoy me levanto muy temprano; ya me espera la comunidad;
Voy subiendo alegre la cuesta, voy en busca de tu amistad.*

For those of us for whom Spanish doesn't kick in until after our third cup of coffee, the words to this beautiful Lutheran hymn go like this:

*Let us go now to the banquet
to the feast of the universe
the table's set and a place is waiting.
come, everyone, with your gifts to share.*

*I will rise in the early morning; the community's waiting for me.
With a spring in my step I'm walking with my friends and my family.*

Jesus is attending a meal in the home of a Pharisee leader, and as he observes how people maneuver themselves so that they might have the seat of honor, he does what he often does: he tells a parable. To understand this parable better, it helps to picture what the guests would have pictured. The banquet hall would have been a room with cushions instead of tables and chairs. Guests would lounge and recline as they ate, drank, and talked with each other. And instead of sitting at the head of a table, where we might put an honored guest, the supreme place of honor would be at the cushion in the center of the room. This would be reserved for the men who were the wealthiest, or the ones who held the highest level of office, or the ones with the most power. In a custom that hasn't changed much in the last two thousand years, these men would typically be fashionably late. So when Jesus recommends not choosing the seat of honor for yourself, in case someone more important arrives after you and boots you out of your place, it was quite practical advice. Practice a little humility and you will save face

later on, and perhaps even be rewarded by being offered a higher place than you originally claimed for yourself.

But, we know Jesus. We've read all about him and have heard his other parables. We know that even though there might incidentally be practical merit to his parable, it goes a lot deeper than practicalities. We know that when Jesus tells a parable, he's trying to explain the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God—trying to help his listeners understand how God is calling them, and us, to a radical new way of being on this earth. The Kingdom of God has little to do with dinner party etiquette. It has little to do with First Century Miss Manners or Emily Post-like advice for his brethren. We know Jesus, and we know that a parable that begins in a banquet is intended to carry us out into the world.

My favorite part of this parable is the second part, when Jesus tells the banquet host not to invite the rich and fabulous, or even their family or neighbors. Jesus says to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—that by inviting those who cannot repay your invitation and your hospitality, you will be blessed. Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is a place where those who have no other place to go are invited. The Kingdom of God is where those who have nothing to give are given the place of honor. In the Kingdom of God, God welcomes all us in with equal amounts of love, knowing that even though there is truly nothing we can do to repay God's love and mercy, we are still welcome. We are still loved.

For the past two weeks, there has been a real life example of the Kingdom of God in the national news. Antoinette Tuff, a bookkeeper for an elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, has been in the news because when a young man named Michael Brandon Hill, arrived at her school with a gun and with the intent to kill/harm the people in that school, Antoinette Tuff talked him out of it. When I heard her story, I cried. Antoinette Tuff came face to face with Michael Brandon Hill, his weapon, and his ammunition. He took her hostage at the school, and over the course of a half hour, Antoinette talked to him as if he was her friend. She listened to him and his fear—his fear over what he had decided to do that day, and his fear for his mental health.

She affirmed his feelings, and then she kept going. She opened up to him about her own life. Telling him about her husband leaving her, her sons disabilities, and her own recent desire to commit suicide. She related to his story, and showed him empathy. She showed him the same level of compassion and care that you would show a family member or your best friend. Their whole conversation and interaction was recorded by 911 as Antoinette communicated between Michael and the police waiting outside. The most touching moment, the one that reduced me to tears, came right at the end after Michael surrendered and the police came inside. Everyone was safe. The ordeal was over. Antoinette could have walked away, but she kept talking. She said to Michael, "It's going to be all right, sweetie. I just want you to know I love you... We all go through something in life... You're going to be OK."

Isn't that all anyone wants to hear: that you are loved, that we all go through something at some point, and that no matter what it is, we are going to be okay? That's the most powerful message you can give to someone. That is a message straight from the Kingdom of God. On that morning, Antoinette was the host, and she made Michael the guest of honor. Had Michael not met Antoinette, the world might be calling him a monster. But thanks to the brave, radical love of one woman, we can see that he is a human being, not too different from me or you.

Jesus' parable and the story of Antoinette Tuff and Michael Brandon Hill is a reminder that the Kingdom of God is all around us: in our schools, in our homes, even in the grocery store or at the Labor Day bar-b-que. The Kingdom of God is an invitation to offer love, kindness, and generosity--not because we hope to get anything in return, but because we have experienced how powerful it is when we receive love, and we want others to feel the same way. We want others to know that it's going to be all right. You're going to be okay. And even if it isn't right now, we love you just the same.

One of the most important things we do as a church is to create the Kingdom of God all around us, and to invite others to share in it. In fact, if someone asked me "What is your South Church about?" or "What do you guys do? What's your thing?" I think I would answer by saying, "We are living in the

Kingdom of God, and everyone is invited!” On Sunday mornings, this sanctuary is transformed into God's banquet. We are quick to say, “No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.” That is because at God's banquet, there is a seat for everyone. There is especially a seat for anyone who has ever felt broken inside, who has ever felt worried for their mental health, who has ever been left by someone they love, who has ever struggled to care for a son or a daughter or a parent, who has ever felt like they don't have a friend in the world, or who has ever felt like the weight of the burden they are carrying is too heavy. If any of that has ever described you, in this church, there will always be a place for you. You will always be welcome.

One of the things I love most about this church is that there are no requirements. We do not take attendance, but we're thrilled when you are here. We do not have dues, but we rejoice when those who can, give. We do not require membership after you have been attending for six months, and in fact, even if you never want to join, you can be our friend and you can serve in ministry just the same as anyone else. But only if you want to—only if you can. Young families, who are pulled in twelve different directions on seven different days, often tell me that one of the things they love most about South Church is that we don't make them feel ashamed when their children have to miss church school. They love that they and their children are welcome as often as they can come, but that there is no requirement. In fact, that unconditional welcome makes them want to come even more! That sounds good to me.

At South Church, we are community of people where we take turns being the hosts and the guests. When we are strong and healthy and secure and when we are able to give our time, or our talents, or our gifts, we do. We step up to play the host, to set the banquet table for others, or to fluff up the cushions of honor. We do so because we also know what it is like to be on the other side, to be the guest who comes searching, uncertain, and a little afraid. We know what it is like to be welcomed in. We know what it is like to be loved. We do it because we have been told, “It's going to be alright. We've all be through something. You're going to be okay.”

Next week officially begins the program year at South Church. There will be a lot of invitations—they have already begun. When you hear them, know that these are invitations, not obligations. We extend these invitations so often and so enthusiastically because we want you to know that you are welcome here. But there are no requirements. There is no shame. There is only love. You can truly bring your whole self to this church. And so, if this is a season where you are going through something—and many are—know that we will feed you. We will clothe you and comfort you. You will be our guest. Know that no matter what, we will love you.

*Dios nos manda a hacer de este mundo
Una mesa donde haya igualdad trabajando y luchando juntos
compartiendo la propiedad*

*God invites all: the poor and the hungry
To the banquet of justice and good.
Where the harvest will not be hoarded,
So that no one will lack for food.*