

Whom do we want on our guest list?

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
14th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 17, Year C. (Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14)*

A few years ago, Joan and I were having dinner with some people who visit Christ Church regularly from out of state. When these folks come here, they always have questions about our church, and the conversation that evening touched on our First Sunday Breakfast (an event which, I might add, will take place again next Sunday). They had been present at the breakfast, and they'd observed that there were some apparently homeless people there who looked as if they'd just come in off the street. —“Was that right?” our friends asked.

I said, “Yes, that’s right. There were several homeless people eating with us last Sunday morning.”

The questioner then asked, “You mean just *anybody* can come to your breakfast?”

I smiled at the question and said, “Well, yes. This is the church. ‘Just anybody’ *can* come!” Then we all had a good chuckle, because the people who asked the question are devoted Christians. And they said, “Well, good for Christ Church!”

In the Bible it says “God is no respecter of persons.” That means kings, queens and homeless people, corporation presidents and kids who work in the mail room, movie stars and pre-school teachers, archbishops and church janitors, are all the same in God’s eyes. There is no divine preference for the rich and powerful. Instead, if we really believe the Bible reveals the nature of God, it looks as if there might be a divine bias in *favor* of the disadvantaged, the poor, and the rejected of the earth. Remember the words that Mary the Mother of our Lord sang after the angel Gabriel told her that she would bear the Messiah:

*The Lord has scattered the proud in their conceit;
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has remembered his promise of mercy.*

The mission of our church is to be an OUTPOST of the Kingdom of Heaven – to be part of the answer to what we ask every time we say the Lord’s Prayer: “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” In the Church, our standards, our way of thinking about ourselves and other people, are set by the Biblical vision of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus intends that anyone who experiences the hospitality of his disciples – anyone who comes into a service on Sunday or who spends time in the company of Christians at events like our First Sunday Breakfasts – should taste the reality of the Kingdom of God. We could say that they should “experience heaven” when they’re here with us! And that “heavenly experience” has nothing to do with great music, or an interesting sermon, or the beauty of the building. No. It has to do with the loving acceptance, compassion, generosity, and contagious joy displayed by the followers of Jesus.

Bishop Tom Wright, whom I have quoted to you before, says that Luke's gospel has more meal-time scenes than all the other gospels. He says, “If Luke’s vision of the Christian life, from one point of view, is a journey, from another point of view it's also a *party!*” In Luke, Jesus seems to be eating all the time,

and when he's not eating, he's *talking* about eating! He gets invited out to dinner a lot, frequently to the home of a prominent person.

The Bible's most common symbolic picture of heaven, its most frequent metaphor for the Kingdom of God, is not a city with streets of gold, but a *wedding feast*. The reason for this symbolism is that poor people in Bible times rarely had enough to eat. Some days, they just had a handful of parched grain, four or five olives, and a piece of cheese, washed down with goat's milk. They might have had a few sheep and goats, but they raised those animals for their wool and milk. They rarely butchered them. Therefore, ordinary Galilean peasants almost never had meat to eat except at Passover or a wedding feast. —So their idea of paradise, of "heaven," came to be a big party that included lots of delicious food, abundant wine, music, dancing, laughter and fun. (I like to point that out to people who think Christians should be puritanical and dull.)

That's also one of the reasons why our Sunday worship centers on a meal. The Eucharist, the sacrament of the Lord's Table — though now it's only a *symbolic* meal — is an anticipation of heaven. The question the Lord is asking us today is: *Who are you inviting to your banquet? Who do you want on your guest list?*" In other words, who are the people we'd like to have come and share our Sunday feast, week after week — both the abundant breakfasts like the one we're going to lay out next Sunday and the sacramental meal which is the symbolic bond of our fellowship week-in and week-out?

Who do we want on our "guest list"? Let's think. Why, I guess the first people I would put on our guest list would be ones who have the potential to make big pledges to help pay for this building ...and all the monthly bills, too. This is stewardship season, and the Rector is thinking a lot about money!

Along with people able to write big checks, we'd also like to invite those who have time and talent to help with Godly Play, serve on the Altar Guild or Vestry, and volunteer for the tutoring program or Holiday Baskets or the homeless shelter or other outreach ministries. On our dream "guest list" we'd like to have people who are able to keep Christ Church a "successful" parish. Then we'd round out the list with busy young, high energy couples with cute kids, people who one day might take over the work of the church from us graybeards. —If we're totally honest, those are the kind of people we'd **LIKE** to invite to sit at our banquet table.

We *aren't* likely to go looking for illegal aliens, bag ladies, high school dropouts, or people who just got released from the county jail.

BUT: If we're going to take the gospel seriously (and God help us if we *don't*!)... If we're going to take our status as an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven seriously... If we're going to recognize this altar, seriously, as the banquet table of the Lamb of God... Then maybe we should pray and ask Jesus who he has on *his* guest list!

What would happen, do you think, if we took Jesus' words in today's gospel literally and intentionally went looking for modern day equivalents of "the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind" that Jesus talked about to the rich Pharisee? Who might be 21st century counterparts to those New Testament-era "undesirables"? —Maybe ex-convicts, delinquent teens, ski bums, the hopelessly unemployed, and people who sleep rough under bridges or down by the river. Maybe people who clean the rooms and make up the beds down at the Little Nell.

If we sought out marginalized people like those to invite to our weekly banquet, do you think we'd ultimately find that our resources were tapped out? Do you think the generous givers we depend on for "resources" would abandon us and go looking for a church where everybody else at the Table looked just like them and nobody ever showed up who hadn't had a shower and put on clean clothes?

Or would maybe something ELSE happen? ...something of a revelation. ...something of a miracle. ...something that would show that Christ Episcopal Church in Aspen is, indeed, an outpost of the Kingdom of God!

Jesus is asking us to put some so-called "marginal characters" on our guest list, to include them in our lives, not for *their* benefit, but for *ours*. Here's the thing: If seats at the heavenly Marriage Supper of the Lamb of God are assigned by God's grace, and not by our own "this-worldly" standards, then we're going to find heaven to be a very surprising place when we get there. —But maybe, if we choose to see our guests as Jesus sees them, we can make heaven happen right here! After all, won't we pray once again, in just a few minutes, as we do over and over in church: *"thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"*?

Jesus said: *"The Kingdom of God is in YOUR midst."*