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Who's Coming to Dinner? Luke 14:1, 7-14

The dinner table has always been a focal point in families and a symbol of stature and fellowship.

Do you remember the first year you were no longer expected to sit at the kids' table for Thanksgiving and had a seat at the big people's table? It was like a rite of passage into adulthood.

Sitting at the table has become a symbol of civil rights in our nation. In 1960, four black students sat on stools at the lunch counter in the Woolworths in Greensboro requesting a meal. It may not seem unusual to folks today, but in 1960, non-whites were not permitted to sit and eat. You could order food, but had to stand to eat your meal. The rules didn't change overnight and most white persons of Greensboro were outraged by the protest. But it should be noted that an elderly white woman put her hand on the shoulder of Franklin McCain, one of the black students and said, "Boys, I'm proud of you. You should have done this 10 years ago." (I can't help to envision that woman as Tillie....followed by Katharine and Hans sitting on stools beside the students!)

And how can we talk about the dinner table without mentioning that wonderful movie from 1967....*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* That was about a middle class, white couple played by Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn whose rebellious daughter brought her new fiancée home to meet the parents. To their surprise, the fiancée was Sydney Poitier, a black man. Pretty shocking situation for that time period because in 1967, interracial marriages were still illegal in many states. So this was something entirely different than saying OK to equal rights or sharing a counter with people different than us in a public place. This made us think about things like inviting someone different into our own homes and not just to share a meal, but to become a part of our family.

The movie explored everyone's thoughts and feelings about the couple....her parents...his parents...the housekeeper....the priest.....And if you watched the movie, who can forget the powerful speech in which Spencer Tracy choked everyone up by

telling the interracial couple to put aside all of the reasons why they shouldn't get married, stop listening to what others' thought and to pay attention to what they felt for each other....pay attention to the love in their hearts. And of course, the movie credits rolled while we watched the couple, both sets of parents and the priest sit down to the table for dinner - showing that love was what really mattered and despite their differences, all were equal around the table.

I think today's passage from Luke is the Biblical version of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." We heard a story in which the dinner table also held significance in society. In this story, Jesus departed from the mainstream and suggested two radical changes at the table. He challenged people to forget about the accepted arrangements in which persons were assigned seats at the table based upon their stature and place in society. And as if that wasn't enough, Jesus demanded that we expand our list of invitees to include folks from the wrong side of the tracks.

He went on to promise that if we do this, a couple of things would happen. One - we would be able to relax and be more of ourselves. Two - we would experience an incredible blessing.

This seems pretty simple and kind of like St. Paul's, doesn't it?

- We take a lot of pride in being Open and Affirming - welcoming and giving hugs to all folks regardless of ethnic background, age or sexual orientation.
- We state that no matter who you are or where you are on God's journey, all are welcome here-letting folks know that they have a seat in our pews whether or not they share the same Christian beliefs as we do or not whether they are even a Christian.
- Our communion table is open to all - seekers, doubters and believers...and we don't make you openly affirm which category you belong to!
- We go out of our way to keep our doors open every day to hundreds of folks who need a place to work and share their recovery from their addictions.
- And we support several programs in which we feed others less fortunate than us through the Emergency Feeding Program, First Ave. Mission Center or pancake breakfasts.

So, don't we have this in the bag? Aren't we the exactly what Jesus is challenging us to be in the story? Shouldn't we be on the front cover of the conference newsletter as the poster church for being progressive?

While I do love St. Paul's and believe we have a lot of good things going for us....I also suspect that maybe Jesus wants us to look a little deeper into things and not rest so much on our laurels. As Will Rogers says, "Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

The Center for Progressive Christianity - an organization to which we belong and have taken a pledge to support says that "By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting they become like us in order to be acceptable."

Sure, we don't ask anyone to change or even all believe in the same. But, the pledge didn't just say our doors are open....it says that all are invited to participate. And that means full participation. Not just the ability to order from the counter but must remain standing in the back until you have been here long enough. Not just a seat at the table in a designated spot of seniority. Not just a seat that is assigned for the new folks until you are here long enough to sit at the adult table. Not just order from the menu...but help to develop the menu.

I remember that after coming to St. Paul's for only a few months, an announcement was made that they were looking for people to be on the search committee for a new pastor. They specifically asked for 2 folks who were not yet official members. I was scared but excited to put my name on a piece of paper saying I was interested and place it in the offering plate. What if I was rejected? What if I wasn't what they were looking for? What if I wasn't good enough? That was way out of my comfort zone to volunteer for something like that with people I didn't know very well....as I'm sure it is for most people.

But, I am so glad I did. That experience is what provided me with an understanding of the UCC and very deep connection with this church. That was the reason I eventually became a member.

But, what if I hadn't put my name in the plate? What if they only wanted members on the committee? What if I didn't feel brave enough to volunteer?

What if no one went out of their way to let me know that they wanted a diverse group of experience on the team? What if no one even remembered my name? What if? Think about it....do we do a good job of inviting everyone to fully participate? Do we do things the way we do them....because that's the way we have always done them? And those are the people who always do it?

And while we are thinking about change.....let's try on another tough question:

Think of the type of person who would make you most uncomfortable if they sat next to you? Maybe it is your boss who you aren't particularly fond of. Maybe it is someone who is mentally ill. Or possibly it is someone who is a fundamental, right wing Christian who opposes same sex relationships. In any case....envision that person who makes you uncomfortable....and imagine they are sitting next to you right now. If we are truly a progressive fellowship in which all are invited to fully participate....what can you do to make them feel welcome? What are you willing to change to make them feel included? Not change them....but invite them to fully participate just as they are?

Not so easy to think about.... At least not think about without ulterior motives. And quite frankly, changing some things is not always the right thing to do. We certainly can't be expected to change who we are and how we do everything to meet everyone's expectations...can we? This isn't Burger King and you can't all have it your way...can you?

Within the first couple of months of Tim being called to St. Paul's as our pastor, the honeymoon was over. A probation officer made us aware that a high risk, registered sex offender wanted to attend our worship services. Since there were minors present, they were required by law to inform us and develop an escort plan to ensure safety of the children.

At first glance, this seemed like a no brainer.....absolutely not.....no way! Too much required on our part to escort. And ...more importantly...too much concern about our children and young teens.

But, if our doors were really open to all....how could we say no? Wasn't this a prime example of what Jesus was trying to tell us to do....invite the misfits....give everyone a seat at the table?

In this case, I firmly believe we did the right thing. As a council, we met with the probation officer and collected the facts. After relaying the requirements, the officer emphatically recommended that we did not allow the person to attend worship service. The risk of repeat was too high. The individual had just been released from prison after reoffending and breaking his probation.

The council struggled with the dilemma.....open doors -vs- safety of our children and emotional well being of all. We prayed and finally decided that if the person did really want to worship or explore a spiritual journey with us, we would invite him to a Bible study or some other alternate session in which we could assure only adults were present and support his journey. We would also reconsider the request to attend worship service after a year in which his probation requirements were met and his probation officer might have a different recommendation.

In the end, he did not take us up on our offer and we have not heard from him again. But, I can tell you that I strongly believe we did the right thingand stayed true to our claim of open doors. I'm proud of the process we went through and believe we received the blessing of renewed values and integrity by going through that process.

I don't know for sure, but I don't think we are supposed to be all things for all people. But, I do believe that Jesus is telling us to continue to be open to change.

What things are core values that you are unwilling to change? 12 Step program support, support of same sex relationships or some other social justice issue?

What traditions do you feel strongly about? Time of worship time, the Serenity Prayer, choir every Sunday, pancake breakfasts

This is a current challenge at St. Paul's and what I think Jesus is asking us to do in the scripture reading.....consider and be open to change. Over the past couple of years, we have learned to deal with having a part time pastor. We are currently exploring the role of music in our church with the search for a new music director. Through council and during the collegium Tim and David attended, we have been exploring what it means to be a healthy, small congregation rather than focus on

success being defined as simply a growth in numbers. Tim will be continuing to explore this with everyone at the upcoming Labor Day retreat.

We need to ask for others' opinions and needs, listen and be aware of what people are saying or not saying. We need to make sure everyone has an equal seat at the table and relook at the menu. We need to trust in listening to what God is calling us to be....as individuals and as a congregation. And as Jesus promises.....we will be able to be more comfortable with ourselves and receive great blessings! Change isn't always easy...sometimes it is downright scary.....but believe in Jesus' promise. We can become more of ourselves and receive great blessings.

While on vacation earlier this month, I was struggling with what to say today in response to the weekly Bible passage. My sister, Julie shared a book with me - Mitch Albom's "Have a Little Faith" - that "coincidentally" has a lot to say on today's topic. and again, used the symbol of the dinner table to make a point. I'd like to close with an excerpt which beautifully sums up what I am trying to express.

"The Reb once gave a sermon in which heaven and hell were shown to man. In hell, people sat around a banquet table, full of exquisite meats and delicacies. But, their arms were locked in front of them, unable to partake for eternity.

"This is terrible," the man said. "Show me heaven."

He was taken to another room, which looked remarkably the same. Another banquet table...more meats and delicacies. The souls also had their arms out in front of them.

The difference was, they were feeding each other."

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" Let's get excited about the surprises and blessings in store for us!

AMEN