

St. Luke's UMC  
February 14, 2021  
*Valentine's Day*

*Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be*  
***An Open Community of Christians!***  
**Matthew 22:1-14**

Happy Valentine's Day! I'm at my house and as you can see, the table is set for a wonderful Valentine's dinner, so the sermon can't go long because I'm going to have to get busy putting together a romantic dinner for Susan!

Now, why am I at my table at home for today's sermon? To answer that I need to tell you a little bit about this table. I bought it some years as a Mother's Day present for Susan. She saw it in a furniture store and fell in love with it. Its called a refectory table because there are hidden leaves under both ends. When you pull them out you can seat about 14 people. We had a home with a large room just off the kitchen where this fit perfectly. And then we moved to our home here in Indianapolis.

It never fit. The eating area in the kitchen was tiny. Honestly it looked silly. We wondered if we should sell it. Then, when the kids moved out we looked at other homes where it might fit better but we never found anything. Finally, this past year, we made a decision to stay in this house and renovate. We updated our kitchen and tore out a wall so the table would look appropriate. That's right, we renovated nearly the entire first floor of our house for a table! Makes a lot of sense of doesn't it?

Well, when you think about what goes on at this table, it really does. We've done a lot of living around this table. We've eaten a lot of meals as a family, especially this past year when we couldn't go out! We've laughed a lot around this table. We've cried. We've prayed. We've had tough conversations. We've shared wonderful memories. We decided this is the heart of our home.

So why am I here? Because Jesus said this is what heaven will be like. It will be like a banquet table which will be the heart of our eternal home.

In middle eastern culture of that time, a meal was an important activity. It was sacred in many ways. You didn't just eat a meal with someone, this is where they were accepted and honored and felt worthy. In some customs, forgiveness between people wasn't complete until they broke bread together. A true table is like an altar.

So Jesus tells a parable that appears in both the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. At first they sound very similar, but upon careful analysis you realize they are quite different. Yes, both have to do with a wedding feast, a table that has been set, guests who won't come, a king who sends servants to invite anyone to come, and so the table is full. But Matthew's version is a little sharper. And it has an ending that seems very peculiar. So I picked this story to conclude our series *Becoming* because today we are talking about the very heart of who St. Luke's is, an open community of Christians. So what

better place to be than a table that stands for welcoming all people. But let's look at this story a little closer.

One thing you notice in Matthew's version of the story is that there's a lot of violence going on. Not only do the invited guests not attend, but on a second invite they mistreat the messengers and kill them. So the king who invited them to a feast that is already prepared wages war on them and sends out an army to destroy their city. If the food is hot and ready to serve doesn't that seem like an odd time to go to battle? I can hear the king's wife now, "The food is on the table and you're going to battle now!" This of course doesn't even address the fact that Jesus seems okay with this kind of revenge and killing.

So you can see that there are some things a bit farfetched in the story. Scholars say this reflects Matthew's influences in telling it, but that raises a question as to just why Matthew would tell the parable in such a way. What's going on? Perhaps Matthew is expressing his own grief, and maybe even anger, that **not everyone wants to be at a table that welcomes everyone**. One thing is for sure, few things arouse strong emotions from religious people like opening their tables to just anyone.

One of my first churches was this tiny congregation located at the base of Cold Mountain, yes the one from which the book took its name. It had members who had lived in those rural mountains all their lives. BUT! It also had a country club that had been built right beside the church. Mostly Floridians lived at the country club during the summers and there was this uncomfortable tension between locals and outsiders.

I led a Bible study at this church every Wednesday evening. I prepared that morning and planned to visit a local elderly woman who was dying before going to the church. Then right before leaving the parsonage, I got a call that a man who lived at the country club and who had cancer had been rushed to the hospital and the family asked if I'd come. Well, the hospital was 45 minutes away. I couldn't make both visits and be at the bible study on time, so I had to make a decision and went to Asheville.

I arrived at the study right before it started. We usually began with prayer concerns and people went around the table. We came to an elderly woman who seemed to be just waiting. Her face started to turn red, she looked at me and said, "Miss Millie died today." That was the woman I had planned to visit. I said, "I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that." Then she pointed at me and said, "And she didn't even have her pastor with her!" I explained that I had been at the hospital visiting this other man. She nearly screamed her response, "Rob! He's not even one of us!"

It was my first real taste of how people can get who see the world as us and them. And realize this was an elderly, white, heterosexual woman saying speaking about an elderly, white, heterosexual male. Just imagine how mad she might have gotten if he had been even more different than just being from Florida! Thank goodness he wasn't from New York!

I believe Matthew told Jesus story in such a way, with strong emotion and reactions, to get our attention and tell us, “Don’t become that church. Don’t become those people who are so threatened by difference.”

But notice how the story continues. The host of the meal still has a problem. The table is set and the chairs are empty. So he sends out more messengers. He says, “***Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.***”

They brought in the good and bad. Now weren’t the people who first killed his servants bad people? And now he’s bringing in more bad people? What kind of king is this, that no matter how badly he’s treated, he doesn’t give up on bad people?

But notice something else. The king sends messengers to people to invite them. **Openness means actively seeking people.** The king doesn’t just put out a sign that says, “All are welcome. Come if you like.” He doesn’t put an invite on social media. He meets people where they are and invites them in. And we learn something very important here about the kingdom of God and the kind of community God wants for his people. God wants a community that cares enough about others that we will do what it takes to reach them and let them know they have a place at the table.

What’s going to raise the chance that people will respond to such an invitation? Knowing they are truly welcome. Knowing someone cares about them. That if someone comes to them to invite them personally, then maybe the house where they are going is a safe place.

When my family sits at this table, we are typically eating together, but something else is usually going on. We are finding out about what’s going on with each other. What happened that day? What did you do? You share each other’s concerns and experiences. When that happens, it shows that your life matters. We know that our lives matter when others care enough to learn about us.

On our web site is a video Matt Bays did that shares what his experience was like when he first came into St. Luke’s. Watch this...

So let’s go back to our parable. A king invites people to his son’s wedding feast. When the ones invited don’t want to come, the king invites others, any others, to attend. And they do and the table is full and it’s a party. If the story ended there, it’s a good story. But it doesn’t. The king walks around the banquet table and there is a man not wearing his wedding garment. What was the wedding garment.

Think of it like a neck tie in a fancy restaurant. Remember when some restaurants used to say men had to wear a tie, and if you didn’t have one they would provide one. Now it might not go at all with what you are wearing, but you have to put it on. It’s a show of respect.

The king provided a garment, but someone is there not wearing one, and when the king asks, “Why not?” The man goes, “Uhhhhh.” And look what it says, ***“Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ‘For many are called, but few are chosen.’”***

Give me a moment....that’s just a hard one!

Unless you think that the table is about you. Once you have a place at the table that is all that matters. But it isn’t. Grace gives us a place at the table, but grace doesn’t stop there. Grace changes us, just like a change of garments. What would it mean if we said, “I like having a place at the table, but I don’t care about this house! I don’t care about this family! I’m just here to get what I want.” That would be an offense to the host.

Remember the story of the Prodigal Son? Another parable. A son has a place at the table, but he says to his dad, “I don’t care about this house. I don’t care about this family. I just want what you can give me.” SO he takes his inheritance and leaves, but eventually he realizes he blew it. He’d give anything to be back at the table. And so he goes home, and to his surprise, the father welcomes him back. Throws a feast to beat all feasts. And gives him a place at the table. Because his son was back. Not just back at the table. He was back home.

Jesus wants people who want not just to be at the table but they want to be a part of God’s family. They want to share in the father’s work. They want to live by his values.

But I know, the parable of the wedding feast ends violently. It’s a rather violent story. The man without the garment is thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That gnashing of teeth thing has always bothered. Until I heard someone one day talk about times in our lives we really regret something, like making a bad play in a big game. And we’d do anything to have it back. What do we do? We clench our teeth. What if the gnashing of teeth Jesus talks about is like that? Where we look back and think, “I’d do anything to have that back. Uhhh!”

Perhaps what Jesus is describing is a no regrets life. For people who say, “There are just some folks in this world I don’t want to sit beside. I don’t want to be at the table with them.” There will come a day when you go, “Uhhh. I wish I could take that back!” Or people who say, “There’s no one I don’t mind sitting beside, but let’s be clear, I’m here for me. Life is about what makes my life more comfortable.” There will come a day when you say, “Uhhh. I wish I could take that back!”

So what does this mean for St. Luke’s? Let me close by offering three things we can take from this story that are like a vision for our church this year:

1. Let’s be a church that **Makes Room at the Table**. That starts with making room in our thinking; to care about the issues and matters that affect people very different from us. You know, one of the honest admissions for me from our efforts to be anti-racist, is how many of authors I had not read. I had not read Ta-Nehisi Coates. I had

not read Ibram Kendi. And if I am going to be a pastor not just for our whole church and our parish, I need to listen to the voices speaking for people. It doesn't mean I have to agree with everything I read, but there's no excuse for not listening. Making room at the table begins with caring about what affects people around me.

Sometimes we think if I make room for others, then there won't be as much for me on the table. My needs won't get met. My life's family had this code growing up. Susan's brothers are 6-9 and 6-5. Then she had a sister. Her mother had to cook big meals just to keep their family fed. But typically on Sundays her dad, who was a pastor, invited people to come to the house and eat with the family. Not Susan's mother wouldn't always know how to prepare for this surprise. So there was this code she used: FHB. All the kids knew what that meant. Family Hold Back. Make sure there is enough for others. And the funny thing is, there always was. Whenever they practiced FHB it meant that the family didn't eat more than they really needed. We make room, because we know our needs get met when we do.

**2. Be active in inviting people to the table.** The king in Jesus' parable sent out Servants, and if you haven't gotten it yet, that's us. When Jesus talks about servants, he's talking about you and me. The servants go everywhere, looking for anyone they can invite. I believe Jesus wants a church, where everyone in it shares in the work of inviting. If we live with an inviting lens, we look for opportunities everywhere we go: the salon, the barbershop, the grocery store, the doctor's office, Wal-Mart, the grocery store. Wherever we are with the anybodies of the world. And we simply invite. Invite people to join us. Invite them to special events. Invite them to watch online. You know the best thing about inviting people to St. Luke's? It's not that we are saying to people, "I think you need church." Not at all. The best thing is that it can start a relationship. Because you know what's most important to people about church? It's not what we believe. It's do we care. When we invite people to the table, we show we care.

3. And last of all, this story invites us to ask, **How do I want to change this year?** Just like wearing a wedding garment, changing clothes, the spiritual life is about changing. One of the most important ways we experience lasting change is to connect with other people. Next Sunday begins the season of Lent. We have small groups that meet during Lent. This is where impactful change happens in our lives. That is what the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, discovered long ago. Worship wasn't enough. It was getting people every week in a group with others just asking how each other is doing.

Don't we all need that right now?