

## **“ANSWERING GOD’S CALL”**

**Luke 14:15-24**

**November 17, 2019**

[Jesus’ teaching] triggered a response from one of the guests: “How fortunate the one who gets to eat dinner in God’s kingdom!”

Jesus followed up. “Yes. For there was once a man who threw a great dinner party and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests, saying, ‘Come on in; the food’s on the table.’

“Then they all began to beg off, one after another making excuses. The first said, ‘I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.’

“Another said, ‘I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.’

“And yet another said, ‘I just got married and need to get home to my wife.’

“The servant went back and told the master what had happened. He was outraged and told the servant, ‘Quickly, get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and wretched you can lay your hands on and bring them here.’

“The servant reported back, ‘Master, I did what you commanded—and there’s still room.’

“The master said, ‘Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full! Let me tell you, not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party.’”

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

My friend and ministry colleague, Rev. Wendy Kidd, is pastor at Gunnison Congregational Church. This past week she and her wife traveled to Churchill, Canada for an immersive experience among wild polar bears. I prefer vacation

shorts, flip-flops, and sunglasses to tripled-layered parkas, wind-shields, boots, and super-thick gloves, but to each, her own!

She sent me a mid-week text about the polar bears. I found her remarks a good metaphor for the message Luke brings us this morning about Answering God's Call.

This is what she learned from her nature guide:

Polar bears wait each year for the ice to form atop the water so that they can go out on it to find food and their mate. They have to wait on shore until the ice fully forms— too early, they fall through the ice, perishing because they don't yet have the energy to swim to safety (they have essentially been without food for over 100 days); too late to the ice, they will miss the seals that are crucial food sources for their survival. They have to conserve their limited resources for the challenge. They have to be in the right place, waiting for just the right time, waiting for all the elements to come together.

The same is true for us. We are in the right place and now is the right time.

When Jesus rings the dinner bell, will we be ready to accept his invitation?

I think that Spirit is always ringing that dinner bell. But just like when you were out playing at dusk in the ditch behind the barn or down the street in someone's back yard, sometimes we don't hear it. Or we hear it, but ignore it, because looking for lizards or fireflies or playing catch is just more interesting at the moment.

Do you remember how perturbed your parent was when you ignored the call to the dinner table?

Do you remember the LOOK?

Do you remember the LECTURE?

Do you remember being reminded of the starving people throughout the world that would DIE to eat this meatloaf?

Do you remember how your siblings TEASED you as you hastily washed your hands and wiped them on your dirty jeans?

Now picture Jesus. He has his hands on his hips, for he has called us to dinner and has had to WAIT for us to arrive at the table. This is not the Jesus we want to greet us at the door to God's kingdom, is it?

By now, you may have recognized this as one of Jesus's Scolding Parables. Just prior to today's scripture passage, he has been sitting with some Pharisees who have invited him for their Sabbath meal. The text tells us that Jesus is the central attraction of the gathering, that "all eyes were on him, watching his every move."

A man with painful gout is a guest at the table. Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath? Yes or no?" The religion scholars are silent, silent because the question is impertinent. *Everyone* knows it is not permitted under Jewish law to heal sickness on the Sabbath. Every good Jew knows the law and respects it, everyone defers to the law except Jesus and the man with swollen joints.

When you are hurting, the religious law doesn't matter; all that counts is being at the right place at the right time, and for the man with gout, it is indeed, his lucky day. When he wakes up that morning and reads his invitation to the Pharisees dinner, he falls back into bed, moaning, feeling that there was *no way* he can go out that night, no way at all. He is just too sick. The festivities will just have to pass him by.

Calling for his servant, his intent is to send word that he will not be able to come to the dinner. But the servant quietly massages his swollen ankles and wrists, puts some balm on his skin to take away the ache, and urges him to go. Time and place; call and answer; presence and healing.

When we are angry with God over the unfairness of life, that is precisely when we need to venture out onto the ice in search of companionship and sustenance. That is exactly the right time to answer God's call and come to church.

When we look at our checkbook and see our balance in the red, when we wonder if we can make it until the next deposit arrives, that's exactly the right time to gather up some clothes and shoes and socks that we don't need any more and give them away.

This past Friday and yesterday, Angie Law and I again attended a Rocky Mountain Conference leadership retreat called, "Ignite." We have been involved with the program for about a year and a half now. During our last work session, a teaching process went really sideways and as a result nearly everyone in the group of participants was emotionally triggered. We were disappointed in what happened and that it had put a blight upon what had been a very uplifting, meaningful experience.

We again gathered on Friday, and I have to tell you, I was quite anxious about it. Truth be told, I went there out of a sense of obligation, not joy. Like the man with gout invited to the dinner party, I heard the call and despite my unresolved pain, pulled myself up and into the time and place of the retreat, dreading a possible repeat of harsh words and hurt feelings in the group.

Time and place. I decided as I was writing this sermon that the scripture passage for today was calling me to lay down my anxiety, go to the “dinner party” with my best face on, and see what God was calling me to learn there, to say, to feel—and to change in myself.

The people with invitations in Jesus’ parable miss their golden opportunity to spend time with him at the feast. They all make excuses so as not to have to go. I could have begged off too. I’m sick, I’m exhausted, I have a lot of administrative work to do, I have a sermon to write. I could easily be one of the beg-offs of the parable.

I could have missed the chance to let Spirit do its work with me. I’m glad I didn’t. There was reconciliation and remembrance in that room. We brought symbols of our Ignite journey and we used them to again build our community. There was other anxiousness, but also peace, apology, and prayer. It was a banquet with as many courses as there were dinner partygoers. Time and place; call and answer. Jesus and Spirit: God’s will be done.

When the righteous man invites the dignitaries to his table, they don’t come because they don’t want to hear the truth. The boy I introduced to you from WWII Italy turned 90-years old recently, Pina Lella, gave us his wisdom a few weeks ago when he reminded us that we must give thanks for the miracle of every moment of every day, no matter how flawed. Further he said, “I’ve never told anyone about my war. But someone very wise once told me that by opening our hearts and revealing our scars, we are made human, and flawed, and whole. I guess I’m ready to be whole.”

The vulnerability that is the YES to God’s call, that is the thin-veil moment of human life in relationship with the Divine. The courage in accepting the

invitation is where the healing starts. When God's Spirit greets you at the door, gently takes your hat and coat, and ushers you into the Kingdom of God's unconditional love, that is where your swollen joints find comfort, where the law gives way to compassion, and where your resolve meets your faith. When you answer the dinner bell, there you will find the great feast waiting for you to consume and be nourished.

Plenty of people will be very happy to take your seat, so don't be out back of the barn out of the bell's hearing when it rings for you. It *will* ring for you, and when you accept the invitation to dine on God's love and grace, the meal will be the best you've ever enjoyed.

Will you answer God's invitation?

*I Pray It Will Be So.*