

*A Lever and a Place to Stand: The Mechanics of Transformation (4)*

Luke 14:16-24

I read an essay this week written by a pastor at a church in Waban, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. This church has—just like ours—many programs for reaching out into the community, particularly to people who are homeless. One of them is providing space on their campus, and supplies, for unhoused and low-income people to do art, so they have the resources to develop their own artistic and creative abilities.

On this particular Sunday the sanctuary was set up for communion—just like ours is this morning. The table was set with a clean white cloth, a cup of juice, a loaf of fresh bread, a bowl full of bread in pieces—just the way we serve on communion Sundays. The pastor was ready to say, as she said every time they celebrated communion, that everyone is welcome at this meal where we remember Jesus. That this is a table where no one is turned away. But they weren't quite there yet. She was about halfway through her sermon when the side door to the sanctuary opened and closed—loudly.

Irma, a woman who was part of the arts program and so at the church pretty often during the week had come in the side entrance. She walked across the sanctuary, past the pulpit, and over to the center aisle. She started to turn down the aisle to find a seat. And then something on the communion table caught her eye. She changed direction and walked right up to the table. She began helping herself to the bread. While the pastor was still preaching, Irma ate one piece of bread, then another, then another. Of course everyone in the room was watching Irma, but that pastor was still preaching. What could she do?

After a couple more minutes, Irma filled both her hands with bread, and went back down the center aisle, where she found a seat. The pastor relaxed. Everyone relaxed. The sermon continued. But a few minutes later, just before the sermon was over, Irma got up again. She went back to the table to get more bread!

This time the sermon stopped, while everyone watched. One of the other members of the congregation, Brenda, followed Irma up to the front and just stood next to her. She put her arm around Irma's shoulders. And when Irma was finished—when she had all the bread she needed—they both turned around and walked back to the pew. Irma holding the bread in her hands, Brenda holding Irma. They slipped into the pew and sat down next to each other.

This is what the pastor wrote later about that moment: "While I had been going on and on about the purpose of the church and our call to communion...there was something God wanted to show us. This was what communion could look like... An arm around the shoulders, a filled belly, all the time in the world, and a place in the pew for them both, side by side. There it was, so perfectly simple. So powerfully real."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stacy Swain, *Living by the Word*, in *The Christian Century*, September 13, 2017.

Jesus told a lot of stories about what the Kingdom of God looks like—what the world would look like if God were in charge. Jesus used lots of everyday images: finding a sheep or a coin that you were sure had been lost, a small seed that grows into a tree so big that every bird in the world could nest in it. But the image he used most often—the picture that he thought would tell us most about what God wants for creation—is a dinner. A meal, where people sit down together and share food and drinks and laugh together and feel full and invited and cared for.

In my research for this sermon this week I came across a blog post that struck me as both funny and true. The problem with churches, this writer said, is that what churches invite people to feels more like a banquet than a party. You know that image that comes into your mind when you hear the word ‘banquet’? A banquet is something you feel like you *should* go to. You have to get dressed up in uncomfortable clothes, shoes that hurt your feet. You arrive as late as you politely can. You think in advance about how early you can duck out. The food comes from big pans of chicken cordon bleu and rubbery green beans. You hope the speeches are short.

No, no, this writer said. That’s not the kind of meal Jesus was talking about. ‘Banquet’ is the wrong word in our culture for what the Kingdom of God ought to feel like. It’s a party. The kind of party you can’t wait to get to, the kind of party you remember for years afterward. No multiple forks. No soggy salads. It’s fun and it’s full of warmth and friendship, and it goes on forever. And here’s the main thing about this party, what makes it so interesting: Everyone is invited. Absolutely everyone.

You’ve no doubt heard before some version of the parable we read today. It appears more than once, in a couple of the Gospels. A man—apparently a wealthy, powerful man—wants to host a dinner party. He sends out save-the-date cards, then invitations. And one by one, for whatever reason, the invited guests back out of coming. They offer flimsy excuses. My cow is lonely. Oh, I forgot—I’m getting married that weekend. That’s a bad night for me—I’m really busy. (Maybe true, but still, it says something about attitude.) There’s no email or phone service, so these ‘no’s’ get reported back to the host through his servant. And he gets a little steamed. Clearly he’s being dissed. So he says to his servant, ‘This dinner party is going to happen. It’s important to me. If those people don’t want to come, let’s invite other people. Invite all the people who *never* get invited to dinner parties—the ones who are too poor and too disabled and too invisible to ever be invited to fundraising banquets. OK, the servant says; and he goes out to the streets. He comes back and says, ‘They’ll come, but there’s still room; still open seats around all these tables you’ve set up.’ Well then, the host says, get out there again! Go out and invite everyone you see. Everyone who wants to be here is welcome. This is going to be a fine party. There’s great food, good music ready to go. The people I thought were my friends may not want to be here, but that’s OK. Everyone is welcome here today, to share what I’ve prepared.

There’s a sort of traditional interpretation of this parable, a way in which its meaning is obvious. God is the host, the one who invites people to the party. We are the invited guests. We’re on the first guest list, but unfortunately, we disappoint God regularly with our ready excuses—good or bad—for not coming, being too busy, too distracted. “They”—everyone outside of this place, non-church people—are the street dwellers, the blind, the lame, the poor, the ones invited on second thought. Lesson: we disappoint God by not attending his banquet. We should feel bad about that.

But Jesus never bothered telling a parable whose meaning was obvious. Parables were intended to surprise and even confuse us. And there are so many more intriguing questions to be asked of this story!

Who is this God who is so intent upon holding a party, that he wouldn't just cancel or change the date when the invited guests all declined?

What happened to those people who didn't come? Did they stand with their noses pressed against the glass once the music started, knowing what they were missing? Or were they happy, attending to their livestock and real estate investments?

How about those poor folks who came to the party? Did they dress up, conduct themselves like dignified dinner guests, wait for their turn to be served, take just one dainty piece of the bread out of the basket? Did they feel welcome or out-of-place in that setting?

Who are we in that story? What if someone like Irma was the *first* one invited? What if *we're* the guests who have wandered in without knowing exactly what the host intended? What if what Jesus had in mind was that we would walk right up to this table whenever we're hungry; eat until we are full; live our worship as though it's a party rather than a somber and formal banquet?

There are a hundred ways to see ourselves in this story. I want to suggest just one more to you on this morning, as we begin Compassion Week tomorrow.

In this week, maybe we can imagine ourselves the servant, sent out by the dinner host to offer an invitation, a welcome. To say to the ones you will serve this week, "You are not just an object of our service, or charity. I'm here to tell you: there's a party, and you're invited. Come."

Now I'm not suggesting that you invite people to church here--although that would be nice, not nearly as offensive as you're afraid it might be. I am saying that our presence—who we are as we work and serve and make connections this week with people we don't usually hang around with—is an introduction to a host who is intent on making out of life a party. A God who thinks that's what life ought to feel like: warm, welcoming, full. A life where you get plenty of what you need not by acquiring things, but by giving yourself away. Where forgiveness and grace are not scarce resources, but running over our hands. Where there is a well of peace you can tap into, even when things are not going smoothly, even in a world that feels pretty broken.

This is a party we know about because we too have been invited. We have seen it for ourselves. We've gotten close enough to catch a glimpse of the inside of this host's heart—even if just for a moment—and we know. This we know as surely as we know anything: You're invited. Everyone is invited.