

Who Does Jesus Welcome? Luke 14:16-24

16 Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. 17 When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.'

18 One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' 19 Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' 20 Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' 21 When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master.

The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.'

22 The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' 23 The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. 24 I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I don't know what brought Sara into worship that Sunday morning. Sara was not a regular church attender. She did not grow up in a church community, or really with any religious background at all. She grew up with questions and doubts, like all of us, but was raised to believe the church did not welcome people with those questions and doubts. Sara also is lesbian, liberal, a well-traveled urban professional, and she feared that

Sunday morning how truly welcomed she would be at a church. Still, something called her to come and worship that morning.

That church that Sunday morning was an Episcopal Church, St Gregory's of Nyssa Episcopal Church. And if you know anything about Episcopal worship, you may know that in every service, no matter what, they share in the Lord's Supper.

As they served communion, Sara planned to just sit and watch, staying back. But at this service, at this church, someone came up to Sara and invited her to come and eat at Jesus' table. Hesitantly, Sara got up from her pew, came forward, knelt down, and received the bread and the cup.

And then she says, "Something outrageous and terrifying happened...Jesus happened to me." She felt dizzy and overwhelmed, but also charged with life and filled. Not words, not the sermon changed her, but that act of welcome, of love, of meal, of Christ inviting her in, changed everything. She says from that moment she believed.

From that moment on, she was irresistibly devoted to this "religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are given a seat of honor."

And Sara did not just believe with words. Sara is a person who puts her faith into action. She kept coming back week after week to this community of faith, hungry to meet again the love of Christ at this meal and table. She became baptized and joined as a member. But she didn't stop there. Sara partnered with her new church community to create a new, massive food pantry for all those in her city that also longed to be fed. Every week, the poor, the elderly, the sick, the homeless, the marginalized are fed from the very table where Sara first met the love of Christ. Hundreds each week come into their

sanctuary and gather around the communion table where they share in a literal five-to-six-ton bounty of food, all started because Sara was first welcomed there.

And Sara made sure that it was not just people coming in, collecting food, and then leaving. She knew what a joy it was to share a full meal, and to be invited to use her own gifts. So, she did that for others. Many of those who come in for food, now also help serve at this new food pantry. And many more join together for a meal with all the volunteers gathered around a table before the pantry opens, going over their plans, but also sharing stories, laughter, and love, open to all who are very rarely invited to anyone's dining table for a meal.

This story comes from the wonderful, and sadly late Christian writer Rachel Held Evans,' in her book *Searching for Sunday*. It's about a real woman named Sara Miles, who wrote her own memoir, *Take This Bread*.

After telling the story, Rachel immediately connects Sara's experience at Christ's table with our words from Jesus today. "When you give a banquet," Jesus said, leading up to our reading, "invite the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed."

Rachel goes on to say, "This is what Jesus' kingdom looks like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered around a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry...And there's always room for more."

Sara was hungry that day. And she knew as she had been fed and welcomed and loved, that there are many, many more who are hungry as well.

Jesus doesn't invite those we expect. He doesn't welcome just those we would choose to have with us. And Jesus definitely

doesn't welcome only those who look exactly like us, dress like us, vote like us, act like us, or talk like us. Jesus welcomes the hungry. Jesus welcomes the open. Jesus especially welcomes those who are judged, looked down upon, forgotten, and have been kept out in the past, even by the church.

There is one key phrase I love in our passage for today. After two full rounds of invitations and welcome have been offered and people have come, we are told, "Your instructions have been followed, but there is still more room."

I love that phrase. "There is still more room."

What if that became our motto? What if we looked at who we are as a church, who we already welcome and love, and together we say, "There is still more room." What if we see the gifts and love that are here, and give thanks to God, but say back, "Let's share these even more, because there is still more room." What if we look around and wonder who isn't here yet, and who we can take the daring step to invite, because there is still more room? Who maybe hasn't felt welcomed in the past, in our community, at churches, maybe even here, and we say, Jesus wants them here with us, because there is still more room?

Jesus tells us today what a huge table he has. Big enough for all. He also tells us that for us to truly say yes to our own invitation, we can't keep the party private and closed off. If we truly want to say yes and feast here, we need to welcome others. We need to get out of our comfort zones and places of judgment and see all of our neighbors as Christ seems them. Because there is still more room, for all of God's children. Amen.