

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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September 30, 2018

Luke 14:15-24

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So, the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

### **A Major Shift**

The beauty of yesterday morning issued an invitation I could not ignore.

Just steps out my front door, on my way to walk on Plymouth Beach, I encountered a new neighbor, one I hadn't met yet. She had a cute dog, a hypoallergenic dog (Have you ever noticed how dog owners love to talk about their dogs?) and no sooner had I asked what kind of dog it was then we were off to the races talking about all kinds of things – from dogs to her new house, from empty nest life to her being Episcopalian, then to how, my having issued an invitation, maybe she'd check out our church some day soon.

Encounter number two was a group at the beach, picking up trash. They were "Parrotheads." Have you heard of them? Jimmy Buffet fans, they do good deeds and have fun together. Yesterday it was a beach clean up day.

A ways on down the beach, amidst people strolling the beach with huge trash bags, there were more dog owners to chat with: One a church member, young Jaidyn with a cousin new to town and another church member, Ada Kelly, with her dog. And two older women in bathing suits, setting up beach chairs up against the beach wall to block any wind, there to soak up the last September sun...with whom I had a brief exchange about summer being so hard to let go of.

Heading home, I thought about all these pleasant exchanges coming at the end of what had felt like a tense and exhausting week. So many encounters in such a short time! It was like church, only outdoors. I felt energized, exhilarated, and open to life in a way I hadn't been feeling so much this week.

My walk to Plymouth Beach got me wondering: what if, like a yoga session, and in some ways like my morning walk, what if we began each day with an *intention*: to greet each person we see with true openness, to see each person we encounter as someone valuable, precious a beloved child of God? On the beach, in Home Depot or Market Basket, standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. I challenge you to try it. For one day. Even for a few hours. Wake up and say, "God help me be open to everything and everyone today." See what such a practice brings, what you find yourself noticing or experiencing. How life is different because of this practice.

I should also set you straight. You might think, being master of my own schedule and living as close as I do to Plymouth Beach that I would walk there, a lot. Well, not so much. I get there only now and again. But the real rub is that when I do, I often walk it lost in thought. My head down, pondering something, like what I must do, who I need to call or write an e-mail to, yada yada. I seldom walk the way I did yesterday: with that sort of wide-open heart.

But all it took to be different was a few steps out the door with my head up, and then simply keeping my head up. Isn't there a life-giving invitation here? Isn't this something I could do more often?

Alas, yesterday the wonderful walk had to come to an end. My day was simply not going to be all about walking on the beach, the sun on my face, and the warmth of my interactions with people known and unknown to me. There was this pesky sermon to write, and on this pesky parable no less. I say pesky because parables so often mess with our sense of the way things work, the way we feel things ought to be. They turn our expectations upside down. Jesus often told parables to make people go deeper, to think again about something they perhaps had thought too little, or too glibly about.

So, let's focus on the way the parable begins. First, we need to know the setting. Jesus is sitting at the table in someone's home. He and his disciples are guests somewhere. In the midst of the meal, Jesus says something rather edgy. He says, to his host, you know, when you hold a feast, you shouldn't invite your friends, your neighbors, your kinfolk -- the people you know who can pay you back. No, invite those who can't do a thing to repay you, because then your reward will be in heaven. (Luke 14:12-15) Remember in Jesus day so much of life was about reciprocity. You offer hospitality, because then the person is indebted to you, because in so doing you ensure your own wellbeing. Jesus is taking that and flipping it over, and there it lies, like a turtle on its back. So, a guest at the table, not the host, but not one of Jesus twelve either,

perhaps feeling nervous about what Jesus has just said, stands and says, as if in a toast, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" To which Jesus doesn't say that's right, you've got it. To which Jesus doesn't say yes, and you are included, though it sounds as if the man is pretty sure he is. Instead Jesus responds by telling this parable, about a man who invites people to a great banquet, people who have many good reasons why they can't come. So, he tells his servant to go out and invite others – "go to the streets and the lanes, go to the highways and hedges" he says, (the hedges being a place where people who were migrants, or homeless would seek shelter). In other words, the man says draw the circle wider and invite all those who don't believe their lives are uninteruptible. Invite those who can hear the invitation as the good news it is. Hear it, receive it and show up.

And here's why its pesky. If we're honest, we see ourselves – at least I think most of us do – in the first round of invitees. The ones with just a little too much going on to embrace the moment. Oh, biblical commentators point out that all of the reasons why not are not *flimsy* excuses...this is not "sorry I cannot come, I have to wash my hair" ... the reasons offered have to do with livelihood or honoring relationships, pretty important stuff. But still: the first round invited ones did not step into the moment. They were too preoccupied, too responsible, too in their own groove to see what a wonderful invitation was held before them. Perhaps they thought to themselves, I will go the next time I am invited. Only there wasn't a next time. "This is a bad parable!" someone emphatically exclaimed at bible study this week. We don't like to think of ourselves as being in that first round of folks, the ones who miss out.

And what shall we say about the ones who presumably *will* show up, the second-round invitation people? The servant is to bring in "the poor and the maimed and the blind and the lame." These are the folks not normally included or welcomed, the ones who in Jesus day were deemed "unclean" for temple worship, the ones who would not have had money for a sacrifice to bring to the temple, the ones who many say do not belong. *But the difference, the critical difference, between group one and group two has to do with receptivity.* The second group, it is implied, will be in touch with their need, their own vulnerability, and will therefore accept and welcome the gracious invitation. Their situation doesn't fool them into thinking they are self-sufficient. They are not captive to the idea that they don't need others or need God.

This parable makes me think of another: the parable of the Prodigal Son. While one son comes home, tail between his legs, he takes that step towards home, knowing he needs to be there, while the elder son removes himself from home, scowling to himself about cheap grace. *He* has no need for mercy or forgiveness, trying as he is to be good and make his way all by himself.

As we mark this Recovery Sunday, I'd like to remind you about a night last Spring, during Lent, a Lenten Soup supper, when Katie Morini and Dan Kelly from the Plymouth Recovery Center came and shared their stories -- Dan about his own

struggles with addiction, and Katie about her sister's, who sadly died of drug overdose. Their stories were honest and real. And in their speaking, they broke some of the stereotypes of drug users. They both represented, both came from families that were loving and supportive. Their families didn't sound "dysfunctional" and yet they had a story of addiction and its ravages to tell. And I want to tell you what they said when the evening wrapped up. "We really felt heard and welcomed here. Not at all judged." "Your church is so open" they said.

But you know their stories, and their openness in telling *disarmed us*. We listened, and we wanted to learn more.

Sometimes I want our church to do big things. I want us to find some significant way to address the opioid epidemic, to help people in recovery of all kinds. Then I remember that night, and how important it was to first listen and learn. It was a first step. First steps are important. This is true in Recovery. One day at a time is what they say. So, day by day, step by step, the invitation to new life is entered. You go for a walk rather than drink a beer. You call a friend and talk rather than head to the bar. You write down your feelings rather than drink them away.

And for us as a church, as we learn more about recovery, and about the twelve steps, I think we realize that in truth we *all* have struggles with things that threaten to control us, to own us, to make us less than we might be. Sometimes we are the ones who rise up and step out, accepting the invitation to life. Other times we push away, or shut down, or cling to what we know... we refuse to accept invitations that would lead to greater wellbeing. Maybe Jesus told this parable, so we could all see ourselves in it, in *both* groups. We are this strange mixture of being open and shutting down, each one of us. So, we pray to be open – and on this day, to encourage others in their recovery and to think some about our own.

For we ourselves may not struggle with drugs or alcohol -- but how are we being urged to be less directive, managerial, or controlling in our lives? How are we being urged to let go of obsessions, compulsions, addictions -- even if that addiction, our addiction, is just this one persistent thought we might have, a thought that causes great unhappiness but to which we cling nonetheless? We all have the need to pray the well-known serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

The parable today wants to invite us to a richer, fuller, deeper life. It wants to assure us *it is okay to have needs*. Okay to say "God, there are some things I need your help in learning to let go of." Okay to say there is much about being human I do not understand, and I need to learn more. We may be enough, but we do not need to be self-sufficient.

I would like to offer you a prayer I am told the Dalai Lama prays every morning upon waking. It is a prayer for Humanity, from the Buddhist tradition -- a good prayer for Recovery Sunday and for our participation in the healing work of God. Perhaps as I speak it you can think of yourself, and also of our church and the people who have not yet walked in our doors, but who one day may do just that.

May I be a guard for those who need protection.

A guide for those on the path.

A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood.

May I be a lamp in the darkness

A resting place for the weary

A healing medicine for all who are sick

A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles

And for the boundless multitudes of living beings

May I bring sustenance and awakening

Enduring like the earth and sky

Until all beings are free from sorrow

and all are awakened. *(Shantideva, Indian Buddhist sage, 700 AD)*

Amen.