

Welcome to the Table
18: 1 – 8 & Luke 15: 11 – 24
November 22, 2009

I. Introduction

- A. As a visiting evangelist, I eat at many church potlucks, says the Rev. Dean Benton, of Burlington, IA. In a small-town Kansas church, the pastor suggested a 10-year-old boy to be my host. The youngster took his task seriously. He introduced me to everyone, and then took me to the food table.
- A. Jeremy commented on each casserole. "You'll want some of that and that," he said, pointing. Then looking at another dish, "Trust me. Skip that one." We were near the end of the table when he said, "My mom brought that."
- A. When I asked him if it was good, he said, "The recipe has been in the family for years. Passed down from one bad cook to another."
 - 1. Welcome to the table!
- A. In a little while we will be invited to gather around a table
 - 1. With a particular purpose in the sharing together of bread and grape juice
- A. But we also recognize the value of eating together, in many different settings
 - 1. Whether it's fine food prepared by expert chefs
 - a. Or family recipes that have become a tradition
- A. Many of us will be gathering around tables with family and friends this week
 - 1. As we take a break from our normal schedules
 - a. And give thanks for the blessings we receive from God
- A. And so it seems like an appropriate time to introduce a theme this morning
 - 1. A theme that has been selected by the Pastoral Ministry Team
 - a. To give a bit of guidance or focus to the work and ministry that takes place
 - (1) Here at Sonnenberg, and perhaps to our individual lives as well
 - 2. The theme that has been chosen for the coming year is – "Welcome to the Table"
- A. It's a broad theme, and we hope that throughout the year
 - 1. We will discover many different ways in which it can be applied
 - a. To the various aspects of our church life as well as our personal lives
- A. But the overarching message is one of invitation – Welcome to the table
 - 1. As we have experienced hospitality in all its many forms

- a. So we want to extend that hospitality – that invitation – to those around us
 - A. Not just the common understanding of hospitality as food, fellowship and fun
 - 1. But coming to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the hospitality
 - a. That has been offered to us, as signified by Jesus' invitation –
 - (1) Take and eat, this is my body; and drink, this is the blood of the new covenant
 - 2. What does it mean to accept the invitation God offers to us through Jesus?
 - a. What does it mean to turn down or reject that invitation?
 - A. And how can we, who have been welcomed back from our rebellious wanderings
 - 1. To the banquet table of God's love and forgiveness
 - a. Become the means/messengers by which the invitation is extended
 - (1) To those who are still wandering far from home
- II. We will barely scratch the surface of all the scripture texts that we could look at
- A. On this subject of hospitality – I've chosen two for our consideration
 - 1. In addition to the scriptures that relate directly to our celebration of communion
 - A. The first, from Genesis 18, gives us a basic illustration of what hospitality looks like
 - 1. In the ancient mid-eastern culture in which Abraham lived
 - a. Hospitality was not only a demonstration of generosity and good manners
 - (1) It could be a matter of life and death
 - b. For travelers who made their way through the desert terrain
 - (1) Where food and water were in limited supply
 - c. And where rest and refreshment provided strength for the journey
 - (1) And not just a pleasurable time for relaxation
 - A. The writer of Genesis gives us a heads-up at the beginning of this story
 - 1. About the nature of the travelers that appear at Abraham's doorstep
 - a. When we hear that the Lord was making an appearance to Abraham
 - 2. As far as we know, from Abraham's viewpoint, they were just three strangers
 - A. And the first lesson we might learn about hospitality from this example
 - 1. Is found in the way that Abraham responded – jumping up from where he was seated at the entrance of his tent, resting in the shade
 - a. And running to meet and greet these travelers on the road
 - (1) Notice the similarity here between this story and the story of the prodigal son
 - 2. Hospitality does not sit back and wait to be asked
 - a. And it is extended beyond the circle of friends that we already know

- (1) And feel comfortable with
- A. There are certainly times for family and friends to get together
 - 1. We look forward to that opportunity this week when we plan to be together
 - a. With some of Dottie's family and my family in PA
 - 2. But the example of Abraham is of hospitality that reaches out to the stranger
 - a. Inviting them in and making them feel at home – welcome to the table
- A. Note also that hospitality is offered, in this case, not as a gesture of charity
 - 1. But with the understanding that both parties stand to benefit
 - a. From the interaction between the host and his guests
 - 2. Travelers were a source of news, information from the outside world
 - a. Abraham couldn't have imagined the shocking news
 - (1) That these strangers had to share with him
 - b. A son to be born to him and his wife, Sarah in their old age
 - 3. But surely the offer of a meal and a place to rest was motivated, at least in part
 - a. By the understanding that these strangers had something to offer as well
 - (1) And so it is whenever we extend a welcome to the table
- A. At first glance, this may seem to be different from the welcome offered by the father
 - 1. To the son who had treated him so disrespectfully, as we heard in our second text
 - a. And there is certainly an aspect of forgiveness involved
 - (1) In the father reaching out with open arms to his wayward son
 - (a) That we don't necessarily see in Abraham's offer of hospitality
 - (2) We'll want to look at that some more another time
 - 2. But for now, consider how the father was also motivated by his love
 - a. And his desire to have his son back home, and in a close relationship again
- A. Reaching out to others, motivated by love, always involves a certain risk
 - 1. There is always room for misunderstanding our motives, or even rejection
 - a. But there is also the potential for a great reward or benefit
 - (1) Both to the one who extends the invitation as well as to the one who accepts
- A. There is also an aspect of generosity involved in extending hospitality
 - 1. We see it in the story of Abraham in his elaborate preparations for the meal
 - a. Although some people have noted that it was easy for Abraham
 - (1) To invite his guests to stop and have something to eat
 - b. After all, it was his wife and servants who ended up doing all the extra work

2. But hospitality is often noticed when it makes us feel special
 - a. When the host or hostess goes “above and beyond” the call of duty

A. Dottie has shared a story with me that she heard at a women’s retreat

1. Maybe some of you have heard it already
 - a. And I’m telling it second-hand so I might not have all the details right
2. But it’s a story about a woman who didn’t always understand
 - a. As a teenager growing up, why her mother made such a fuss
 - (1) About setting a nice table for guests, and sometimes just for the family
3. Until the time when she and some friends were driving home from college
 - a. And they arrived at her parents’ home late in the evening
4. She knew that her mother was planning to have supper ready for the group
 - a. But what she wasn’t prepared for when they walked into the house
 - (1) Was the sight of the dining room table, covered with the finest tablecloth
 - (a) China, silverware and crystal arranged as if for a special banquet
 - b. Words weren’t even necessary to express the welcome they felt
 - (1) It was evident in the love and care that had gone into setting the table
5. That is hospitality, and it’s a wonderful illustration of God’s hospitality, too

III. We touched on our second scripture passage already a little

A. And we won’t linger on it, in light of the time

1. Just to note that the father’s love for the son was not diminished
 - a. By the son’s rebelliousness or by the squandering of his inheritance

A. The son could not receive the blessing of his father’s gracious hospitality

1. Until he came to the place where he realized the wrong choices he had made
 - a. And until he turned away from his life of sin and was willing
 - (1) To submit himself to the role of a servant in his father’s household

A. But the father had already dealt with the hurt and pain he must have felt

1. When his son went away
 - a. He had already sacrificed the wounded pride
 - (1) Forgiven the debt that his son would never be able to repay
2. So that he could reach out with loving arms, embrace his son without reservation
 - a. And welcome him back into his home, and to the banqueting table

A. This morning, as we share in communion together

1. We are reminded that we too have been like the rebellious son

- a. We have wasted much of the inheritance we have received
- 2. Spending our time, energy and resources on pleasure for ourselves
 - a. Rather than using them to honor God and to build his kingdom
- A. Perhaps we need to take a moment to examine our lives
 - 1. Are actions or attitudes in our heart for which we need to confess –
 - a. Father, I have sinned, and am not deserving to be called your son or daughter
 - (1) Perhaps we need to return, at least in our heart and mind
 - (a) And say to God – Take me back as one of your servants
- A. If we have made that confession this morning, then we can be assured
 - 1. That God is reaching out to each one of us with open arms – Welcome!
 - a. Welcome to the table!
- A. And as we have received God's love and forgiveness
 - 1. So we can extend that grace to our brothers and sisters, and the strangers among us
 - a. Come, let us go to the table together, and receive God's blessing
 - 2. Welcome! Welcome to the table