



Pentecost 12 – Proper 17 (C)

When You Give a Banquet

[RCL] Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

As their big event reaches its conclusion, the host and hostess look weary. It is not the tired contentedness that follows putting on an enjoyable event, but something different, a feeling of sadness.

The turnout was great from their personal A-list of relatives, friends, neighbors, and business associates. The caterers did their usual superb job with food and drink. The problem was that the guests did not connect on anything other than a superficial level, even though many of them had known one another for a long time. The couple is tempted to call their event a failure.

Jesus is among the few guests still present. After emptying his champagne glass and putting it aside, he approaches his host and hostess.

“When you throw a party,” he says to them, “do not invite your friends and relatives, your neighbors and your business associates. They will invite you to their party in return to repay their social obligation, and so a series of superficial evenings will roll on with no end in sight. The people to invite instead are the poor and the disadvantaged, those not on your A-list or anyone else’s. You will be blessed because they cannot return the favor. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, where you will be mightily surprised.”

Jesus talks here about two kinds of relationships. The first is *transactional*, where you do something for me and I do something for you, but each of us remains fundamentally the same as we were before. This recalls a party where everyone knows what to expect from everyone else. There are no surprises, and no one changes for the better. Transactional relationships can be very safe. They can also be deadly dull.

Jesus makes reference as well to *transformational relationships*. We encounter people different from ourselves. If we enjoy many advantages, then they may be poor, just getting by—or the opposite may be the case. In transformational relationships, surprises take place, change occurs for the better. These surprises may be risky, but they are not dull.

Transactional relationships involve the repayment of social obligations, keeping the books balanced. Transformational relationships, on the other hand, involve the voluntary giving and receiving of gifts, a generosity that surpasses bookkeeping. This is authentic hospitality. A transformational giver often remains anonymous, not wanting to receive credit or be repaid. The higher life to which Jesus calls us is characterized by transformations we cannot predict. Transactional relationships tend to be constricted. “I’ll scratch your back if (and only if) you scratch mine.” Transformational relationships, on the other hand, hint at the profligate generosity characteristic of the Lord and Giver of life.

Not that Jesus explicitly says that those who host the disadvantaged will have their reward in kind. Their reward will be different from rewards as the world knows them. Most dramatically, the recipient will be someone who was not focused on rewards in the first place.

Building upon imagery found in early Christian authors, let’s say you pledge monthly to a ministry that provides impoverished children in a different country with food and other essentials of life. You do this because you believe it is the right thing for you to do, because you believe that God wants you to do this.

Then one day you die, and you appear before God’s throne, as all of us must. Suddenly, the voice of a young boy shatters the solemnity of the divine throne room. You are startled by his voice.

“Hey,” this young voice says in an accent you do not recognize, “I know this one, whose gifts bought my lunch for many, many days; who kept my stomach from emptiness, my eyes from tears of sadness. I know this one. Open the gates of glory! Open the gates of glory now! Welcome this one into the new Jerusalem.” The angel gatekeepers happily obey this command.

Jesus says that the poor cannot repay you. But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous when those once poor will shout that the gates of glory should be opened now—for you. Entrance is not something you earn. It is a gift that you can gratefully welcome. Deep down it hits you as a surprise.

There are many ways for us to give a banquet here on earth and invite the poor and the marginalized at our expense. Even if we are marginalized, even if we are poor ourselves, there is always, always someone else for whom we can do this.

We must stay alert for all the opportunities that appear for us to engage in transformational relationships.

The feed on our phones can keep placing before us gruesome accounts of conflicts connected with weddings, of people treating each other terribly when they should be celebrating a marriage. These horror stories may be rare exceptions, but apparently, they happen. Perhaps they are more likely to occur in a network of relationships closed in on itself, relationships strictly and sadly limited to “your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors,” as today’s gospel delineates.

An antidote to the circle around you turning toxic may be to welcome to the wedding people different from you. This may take several forms: a more intentionally diverse guest list, or not allowing participation in the wedding to become excessively expensive, or asking for a donation large or small to a social justice organization in lieu of one more gift to a privileged couple.

Opportunities to engage in transformational relationships are limited only by our imaginations.

What sometimes happens with a wedding can also happen in the life of a congregation. In place of joy, conflict occurs to the extent that it becomes the dominant theme of congregational life. When that happens, then an honest look may reveal that the congregation is serving only its own people, and maybe not even them. Outreach to others, whether near or far, has been displaced by a viewpoint that does not see beyond institutional survival.

In contrast to this, consider the saying famously attributed to William Temple. He concluded his outstanding career by serving as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944. “The Church is the only institution,” he said, “that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.”

For a congregation to move in the right direction, its meeting place must be recognized as a banquet hall. Members of the congregation are on duty as hospitable servants of Christ, the one who hosts the event. We are to welcome not only one another but outsiders in abundance and plenty of people waiting on the margins, and especially those who seem *so* unsuitable.

The invitation to this banquet must be inclusive, with no exceptions; it must be comprehensive, featuring a welcome to share in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, as well as the many other ways that the church enriches people’s lives.

When we give a banquet in the name of Jesus, all the doors must be open.

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