

Pot Luck Ministry

A sermon preached by the Rev. Cathy Russell

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To say that ministry has changed over the two millennia since Jesus' birth would be a huge understatement. Jesus didn't have to contend with digital technology, generation gaps, global environmental crisis, or a general agnosticism in his own culture. At the same time, many of the realities of ministry are essentially the same- visiting the sick, regular preaching, encouraging prayer and, spiritual growth, and shining a light on injustice are still very much a part of the job. And of course there's another very important area where ministry has hardly changed at all between our time and his, and that is in how much of ministry involves or centres food- around eating and drinking.

It's been duly noted that Jesus did a lot of his best work – storytelling, prophesising, justice making, around the dinner table- from the wedding at Cana to the home of Simon the Leper to the Last Supper on the night he was betrayed. He would have been right at home in our churches today in which we can be sure that wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name there, will date squares and coffee be also. He performed miracles with food and drink on several occasions, and he used meals as the setting for a few of his most pointed parables.

Take the parable of the great banquet we just heard. Perhaps some of you remember a children's song based on this parable called *I Cannot Come to the Banquet*. *I cannot come to the banquet, don't bother me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum, pray hold me excused I cannot come.* The lyrics of this song cast the parable as a kind of cautionary tale about putting self- centred material priorities ahead of the spiritual priorities of God's kingdom. It's a message that rings just as true for us if not more so today in this time of decline and transition in our churches, when we are aware of all the people who are **not** here.

Just last Sunday at coffee time, I was talking to two of our long time sisters in this church, and we all expressed amazement that some people can go through life without the consolation of faith. I went so far to say that I couldn't understand how folks get out of bed in the morning- and I was and am being quite serious. It's really hard for me, and for many of us to understand why people choose not to respond to God's generous invitation.

When we encounter a parable however, one of the ways to let it really go to work on us is to imagine who we might be in the story-not just who other people might be, but which one of the characters stands in for us, or most resembles us. And of course at different times and in different circumstances, that character closest to us might change. The host, the one who issues the invitation is God, so that role is taken. So which of the sets of guests are we- the first lot-the spiritually disabled, who snubbed host's invitation, the second lot who had been dealt a bad hand by life and would rarely have been invited anywhere, or the third bunch hanging out in the streets who were made an offer they couldn't refuse. Well, this morning I would suggest that we think about this parable a little differently. I'm going to suggest that rather than thinking of ourselves as the guests, we might think of ourselves as the stewards who are charged with the task of inviting to, supplying for and serving at the host's party. These folks don't have a starring role in the parable, but they are absolutely necessary if the host's banquet is going to come off. After all, even Martha Stewart can't organise and serve a whole banquet entirely on her own- even she needs a crew to put up the party tent, set the table and comb the grass or whatever she does to get ready for a big event. Believers, you and me, are God's party crew- we work for God, we work together as a team, to prepare and set out the meal, and we embody God's hospitality towards all those God has invited to the great banquet we are to help lay out.

Now, the words great banquet, might conjure up images of fois gras, chocolate fountains, and champagne, served on Wedgwood China and Waterford Crystal. But given Jesus' own sense of humility and his desire to include people who would never get within miles of such a fancy event it's more likely that the kind of banquet God's people are to lay out is a lot more like a

good old pot luck. I absolutely love pot lucks- and I have told more than one person that they are the real reason I got into ministry in the first place. Everyone makes one thing to bring and share with everyone else. The dish they make cost them some money and it cost them some time and it costs them some talent.

Oftentimes the thing that people will make is a specialty- some dish that they're particularly proud of and particularly keen to share- whether it's a savory stew, a decadent cake or a light and flaky quiche. And when the dishes are all laid out together, mains, sides and desserts- with the variety of colours, smells and flavours, well the pot luck as a whole becomes much greater than the sum of its parts. The church is like this too- so many different gifts from so many different folks, but when they're all on offer together-what a feast of riches!

The pot luck works well as a metaphor for Christian stewardship too- for the time talent and treasure given by God which we offer back to God in return. It takes time to prepare a hearty main dish to the pot-luck table, a stew or a casserole. Likewise, the time we invest, in the larger life and mission of the church, our willingness to be present and participate, that's what's going to make our ministry a dish of real substance and sustenance for ourselves and for others- a meal that's going to stick to our spiritual ribs. One of our food distribution volunteers told me recently how some of her friends couldn't understand that she gets far more out of the time she gives into that ministry as a regular volunteer than she would get out of going shopping at the mall or out for lunch instead. But why wouldn't she get far more out of time spent in the ministry of Jesus Christ than in time spent only on herself?

Although normally speaking I would say that I never met a pot-luck I didn't like, this was not entirely true as I discovered when I was living in northern Ontario. One of the communities I served seemed to have banned the appearance of vegetables- with the exception of potatoes. The only green thing on offer tended to be a pickle dish, not a great statement about the healthiness of the meal. Whether or not we enjoy eating vegetables, we know that they provide us with the essential vitamins and nutrients we need to keep our bodies healthy.

In the same way, whether or not we enjoy thinking about how much treasure we give to God's work, money is essential for keeping the body of Christ healthy, active and flexible in the same way. Believe me, nothing can run down the energy of a congregation's leadership faster than constant worries about money. The good news is that like any other form of personal discipline, over time, our enjoyment of vegetables and of mindful stewardship will increase over time and with continuous practice, and we will be and feel healthier for it.

Now, what would a pot-luck be without dessert- without all those remarkable, delectable offerings of pie and squares, puddings and cakes? And what would the church be without the God given talents of its people- those remarkable skills and abilities which, when offered and shared, really enrich our life together? In every congregation, no matter the size there is a remarkable array of talent- creative talents, organising talents, talents of encouragement and support, talents for teaching and prayer. Over the Christmas season, we experienced a richness of musical talent within St. Matthew's, and there is plenty more out there we haven't heard yet- and that's just one area of talent.

Together our time treasure and talent make for a sustaining, nourishing and delightful banquet indeed. Maybe all this talk about food has made you hungry and I hope it has. Hungry not only for brunch right after the service but for opportunities to live as a steward of God's great pot luck. Hungry to offer our time, treasure and talent to feed a world craving the joy of the gospel lived out in community. And as we experience that hunger, we can be assured that as stewards we too will be fed through God's bottomless bowl of grace. Far better fed, far more satisfied, far more blessed for bringing all these things to Christ's table. Fed, satisfied and blessed by our servant most with the most. Thanks be to God, AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Loving God, we are here at your gracious and generous invitation.

You give us life and love, you give us a purpose and a mission, you give us the gifts we need to work for your kingdom.

Through your goodness, and our thankfulness, we can set a table full of good things for those you have given us to love.

Sometimes we feel we are not up to the task, that your grace is insufficient, that our cupboards are bare.

We turn to you now and offer you the hungers of our hearts in this time of prayer. **Trusting in your grace, we bring our burdens to you.**

We pray for our world. For all those who take on the risks of leadership in uncertain and dangerous times. We pray for the government and people of Tunisia where a government has been deposed, and where there is great discontent among the people- may stability be a result of greater justice.

We pray for the people of Sudan, taking an historic vote towards their future- may the ballot not bullets lead the way. We pray for our neighbours to the south, in the shadow of this latest horrific shooting in Arizona. We pray for the families of those who have died, and for those who held up by prayer still cling to life.

We pray for Australia and the devastating and deadly floods. We think of our brother Rev. Gary Magarell and his partner as they spend time there.

Trusting in your grace, we bring our burdens to you.

We pray for our church. We give thanks for the richness of gifts and the generosity of Spirit that makes our faith family a place of joyful service and blessed thanksgiving. For the nourishment of Spiritual life in your love- through worship, work, and witness, prayer and practice. Help us to lay whatever gifts we have out on your table as contributions towards your strengthening and sumptuous feast. Recommit us to our Kingdom's Kids Ministry- Speak to the heart of the one you have gifted to be the new Coordinator a need we must fill. Trusting in your grace, we bring our burdens to you.

We pray for all those known to us who are uppermost in our minds and dearest to our hearts. May your Holy Spirit, Advocate and Comforter be with them. We pray for Marion and Lloyd Barton, for Laura Brant and her infant twins, Barb Christie, all members of the Canadian forces & their families.

Trusting in your grace, we bring our burdens to you.

Gracious God, you do not call us to do anything alone. You give your own self in Jesus Christ truly the host with the most, the leader who serves, the chef and the meal. Through his name, and in the power of the Spirit, we offer these prayers, God most Holy.

Psalm 111

Praise for God's Wonderful Works

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.

His praise endures for ever.

Luke 14: 15-24

The Parable of the Great Dinner

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner." '