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THE BANQUET AT THE CENTER OF LIFE

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Luke 14.12-24

Jesus said: "When you give a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors only, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Then Jesus told this story, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner, he sent his servants 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 regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant returned to report this to the master. Then the householder became angry and said to his servants, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' When the servant did this, he reported that there was still room at the table. Then the master said, '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.'"

Tao Te Ching 11

*We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.*

*We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.*

*We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.*

*We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.*

Each time I read this parable of the banquet feast, I'm struck by how far the Christian church has regressed in its adherence to it. Here we have the quintessential invitation to fill the empty banquet hall with people from all walks of life, but we, like those first invited, find excuses not to participate because we don't think the others who will be attending the banquet will be like us. This banquet hall is the paradigm of the world as God would have it, the world as if God were in charge, showing us quite clearly that God wants a house full of all kinds of people.

Once upon a time, Jesus said, there was a hostess who invited friends to her lavish dinner party, but each made poor excuses for not being able to attend. Perhaps they had some inkling that she was inviting people from the other side of the track, or people on the other side of the political aisle, or people who would bring their screaming babies. So they made up flimsy reasons for not showing. Furious with the snobs who didn't want to rub shoulders with people they didn't like, she decided that rather than cancel the event, she would invite people who don't usually get to attend a lavish event such as she had prepared. So she posted a notice on Facebook to all of the people in the database of her social media friends: her gardener, her postman, her housecleaner, her therapist, her mechanic, and her incarcerated nephew among them.

And the RSVPs began to fill her electronic mailbox. But even with all of these affirmative replies, she realized there was still more room and lots of food, so she personally went to the nursing homes, the special recreation centers, the food pantries, and the homeless shelters with an invitation for everyone to come to her dinner party. This divine banquet, Jesus said, is open to the good, the bad, the indifferent, a feast for the down-and-outers, the upstarts and up-and-comings, and anyone who wants to come.

It was a shocking story to the audience in Jesus's day, for its radical inclusivity pushed the boundaries of religious belief of the time. According to Yale's distinguished scholar of world religions, Lamin Sanneh, early Christianity was unlike any other religion because "it broke out of the confines of geography and race; Christianity was a religion for all seasons, fit for all humanity. (Disciples of all Nations)

Jesus's story is reminiscent of the invitation of that great lady with the torch who has welcomed millions with her engraved summons:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

We have, sadly, lost our way these days, creating one flimsy excuse after another for not participating in such a banquet. And when we can't conjure up any legitimate excuse, we elect religious and political officials who act on our behalf to exclude more and more people so we don't have to do it ourselves. British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says "nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God...in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not my faith, whose truth is not my truth. God is my God," he continues, "but also the God of all humankind."

Consider the times when society has followed leaders who have defamed the banquet: the Christian exclusivism that resulted in the marginalization and persecution of the Jews under Nazi extremism; or

the Crusades that for 125 years sought to liberate the Holy Land from those we called infidels: the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492 and the Inquisition that followed. This begs the questions: why would a God we proclaim to be the very nature of love devise a plan of salvation that automatically excluded most of the people who ever lived on the planet?

Catholic theological Hans Kung says that peace among nations is inconceivable apart from peace among religions, a proposition proved with every suicide bombing, every Jewish settler attack on Palestinian farmers, every incident of Christian arrogance and exclusivism.

Many years ago I was invited to participate in an interfaith wedding, representing the groom's Protestant tradition. Communion was to be served, the supposed banquet of God's kingdom, but we were told at the rehearsal that our half of the gathered guests was not invited to partake. By contrast, I'm proud to say that when I was installed here at NECC, and wanted to invite Rabbi Hyman Agress from Temple B'nai Israel to participate, this congregation decided not to serve communion so as not to exclude him from the ceremony.

We are compelled to show up at the places of injustice to lay claim on the value of each person's life. We take public stands against the growing efforts to preserve white privilege. We take stands against the proliferation of automatic weapons that serve only to kill those we don't want at the banquet. We participate in activities that involve people of all faiths and people of no faith because the God who sends us out with invitations does not discriminate; everyone is invited, everyone is included.

Like the clay pot whose structure creates a center to be filled with good food, and like a house whose external walls and roof exist solely to create a home in the empty center, so faith is the structure God creates with an empty center to be filled to the brim. And we have been sent out with invitations to one and all. To this congregation, it might seem like insight into the obvious, like preaching to the choir, but the world we live in today is as desperately in need of such invitation as has ever been. We cannot rest of our past efforts, or become complacent in a world that desperately needs invitations to join the banquet.

In his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*, Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue pens a simple poem entitled "On Meeting a Stranger."

With respect
And reverence
That the unknown
Between us
Might flower
Into discovery
And lead us
Beyond
The familiar field
Blind with the weed
Of weariness
And the old walls
Of habit.

Amen.