

Proper 17 C Sermon
Luke 14:1, 7-14
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Breaking Bread, Building Community
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On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

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Has anyone seen the film, “Babette’s Feast?” This is a beautiful film and I highly recommend it to you. Don’t worry, I’m not going to spoil the ending! The story begins when a young French woman, Babette, arrives in a tiny Danish village. She is hungry, cold, and has absolutely

nothing more than the clothes on her back and a letter to one of the villagers commending her housekeeping skills. The villagers take her in and give her a place to stay and work to do. Gradually, she becomes part of their little community.

Sometime later, Babette wins a lottery. The villagers assume that she will use the money to return to France, but instead, Babette invites them to a special meal that she will prepare with her winnings in appreciation for their kindness to her. Babette, a famed French Chef, treats the villagers to a feast: generous portions of nutty, black caviar on pancake-like blinis; exotic and delicate sea turtle soup; and savory quail stuffed with rich goose pate and truffles, enveloped in flaky puff pastry, and finished with silky smooth demi-glace sauce. Each course is paired with a different wine and as the apprehensive villagers eat and drink, their reservations evaporate and they find themselves enjoying, no, reveling in the opulent splendor of the moment—experiencing something completely new and utterly wonderful.

In this story, Babette is a stranger. She is completely unknown to the villagers, she neither speaks their language nor shares their religious convictions. She is unused to their cuisine and ignorant of their customs. Yet, the simple villagers take her in and she in turn, shares of herself in surprising and life-giving ways.

In 21st century America, we are taught from a young age to fear strangers. How many of us have learned or have taught the familiar adage, “Stranger Danger!?” Politicians seek to impress upon us the threat that certain strangers bring to the life of our communities and our nation: the risk of lost jobs or overburdened social services, the impossible task of integrating strangers who speak a different language or follow a different religious path, the uneasy peace between locals and strangers who might visit upon them the wrath of some unspeakable act of terrorism. We are taught to build a wall around our hearts and around our borders and even around our churches. We are taught to fear the stranger.

To be honest, I think that more than a little bit of this fear is actually rooted in the way we look at our lives and the life of our community through the lens of economics. Not only are we indoctrinated with a fear of strangers, we are also spoon-fed the belief that there simply aren't enough resources to go around. Strangers make us fear that we will somehow go without.

This economic viewpoint can be described as an economics of scarcity. Faith communities and people of faith can all too easily piggyback on this economics of scarcity with a theology of scarcity. Both of these belief systems are built upon the fundamental assumption that there simply isn't enough to go around. And so, the guest becomes the stranger—an entity to be avoided, feared, and kept out.

Time and time again, the Jesus of the Gospels challenges an economics and a theology of scarcity. 5,000 are fed with 5 loaves and two fish; an old woman's copper pennies are worth more than bags of gold from the rich; true wealth is not what is stored in barns, but what is given away for the sake of the world. The Jesus of the Gospels challenges an economics and a theology of scarcity. He reminds us that there is, and there always will be, enough.

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus finds himself at an exclusive dinner party hosted by a leading teacher. His fellow guests vie for the attention of their host, fighting over the choicest seats at the head of the table, worried, perhaps, that if they sit too far from the top, there won't be food or attention left for them. But Jesus tells them, when you go to a meal, head to the far end of the table. Let your host worry about the seating arrangement. Better yet, when you host a meal, don't even invite your friends because they will feel obligated to invite you to their homes later. Invite strangers instead and have an authentic experience of community—no quid pro quo—just hungry people sharing a good meal. Break bread and build community. There is more than enough to go around!

When we're captive to an economics of scarcity, a theology of scarcity, we run the risk of missing out on the rich and heavenly banquet before us today—friends and neighbors, guests and strangers all sharing out of the richness of their lives, their traditions, their religious convictions. That's the very stuff of authentic human relationship. The story of Babette's Feast is fiction, but the underlying sentiment is gospel truth. Those individuals all too often labeled 'strangers' bring so much to the table. Wouldn't it be a shame to miss out on the caviar, turtle soup, and stuffed quail of authentic human communion?

May we be guided by a spirit of openness, generosity, and kindness as we interact with the guests in our community, in our church, and in our lives that instead of strangers we might meet friends, instead of scarcity we might enjoy all the bounty of today's heavenly banquet. May it be so. Amen.