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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“From God to You to...Who?”

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Luke 14:15-24

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 yokes 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."

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From God to You to...Who?

Jesus tells this story in the middle of a dinner party hosted by a religious leader, and it's not the first time during this party that he disrupts the flow of the evening. Right after he arrives, he encounters a man with dropsy (an illness that causes severe swelling), and he heals him, even though it's the Sabbath and, according to a strict interpretation of Jewish law, healing on the Sabbath is forbidden.

Then Jesus sits down at the table and immediately chastises everyone there for their focus on honor and status. "When you throw a party," he tells them, "Don't just invite your friends and relatives and rich people. Invite the poor, the blind and the disabled –people you don't know, people you usually avoid, people who can't ever return the favor."

Then he tells this parable about a man who does just that. With this story, Jesus offers a radical critique of the social and political practices of that time and place. The Ancient Near East was a culture predicated on honor and shame, and this meant every move people made was calculated to increase their honor and decrease their shame. This was especially true about dinner parties. Who you invited and who got to sit where were big deals, and pretty much dictated the guest list and seating chart of the next party. Everything was quid pro quo and pay to play. Every interaction was calculated to provide maximum reputational benefit.

In the parable, when those guests declined to come to the party, making last-minute excuses that were the first-century equivalent of "I need to stay home and wash my hair" it was a big insult. But the host of this party doesn't shame or punish his friends who so rudely refuse to come to the party. Instead, the host does something unusual, even radical: he goes outside his circle of influence and patronage to make sure that the party is enjoyed by inviting people who can never return the favor, who could never at least by cultural standards –adequately express their gratitude.

In her book *Gratitude*, Diana Butler Bass explains how ancient Rome was structured politically like a pyramid, with the emperor on top. Everything good flowed from the emperor, and by the time it reached the masses at the bottom, there wasn't much left. Gifts, mostly in the form of economic benefits, flowed down and gratitude both in the form of appreciation but more often as financial

debts like taxes, flowed up. Bass observes the structures of the ancient Roman Empire still haunt Western societies today, especially in relation to gratitude. Although democracy was initially meant to offer a fair, more equitable alternative to systems of patronage and feudalism, as commercial interests overtook democratic ideals, gratitude mutated.

Just think about how our politicians are beholden to lobbyists and political action committees that give them the money they need to run their campaigns. Corporations and PACS give politicians money, and the politicians are then much more likely to vote for the policies those groups want which is one reason the NRA has been so successful in preventing meaningful gun control legislation despite the majority of Americans being in favor of reform. Although we may not always think of it that way, this exchange of money for votes is a form of gratitude. Our country's founders may have hoped to create a society that operated differently, but sin is persistent, and we have ended up with yet another pyramid culture in which power and money are concentrated at the very top.¹

Which is why this story Jesus tells is still relevant today. In it, Jesus suggests a radical restructuring of the political and social order by calling us to do more than just exchange favors. Jesus tells us to reach out to those who have been pushed to the margins, those we think could never return the favor. When we do, we imitate God, who, in every moment, extends the benefit of totally undeserved mercy and love to every single one of us. This is an act of compassion that none of us can repay – except by paying it forward.

Jarrett Krosoczka is a children's author and illustrator. When his first book was published, he went back to his elementary school to make a presentation. While he was there, he ran into someone he instantly recognized, and who immediately recognized him. It wasn't the principal or a favorite teacher. It was Jeannie, the lunch lady. As he and Jeannie talked, she mentioned her grandkids. "That blew my mind," Jarrett says. "My lunch lady had grandkids, and therefore kids, and therefore left school at the end of the day? I thought she lived in the cafeteria with the serving spoons. I had never thought about any of that before." This conversation was the inspiration for Jarrett's Lunch Lady graphic novel series, about lunch ladies who use fish stick nunchucks to fight evil cyborg substitutes,

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Gratitude: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. HarperOne, 2018.

a school bus monster, and mutant athletes. At the end of every book, they capture the bad guy in a hairnet and proclaim, "Justice is served."

Jarrett had no idea how much kids would love this series, and how it would transform the relationship between kids and lunchroom workers in schools across the country. Again and again, Jarrett heard the same thing from lunch ladies. First, they told him that they weren't used to being treated kindly in popular culture. Second, they said, "Thank you. Thank you for making a superhero in our likeness."

This feedback inspired Jarrett to create School Lunch Hero Day when kids can make projects for their lunch staff. On this day incredible stories have been celebrated the lunch lady in California who keeps an eye on the kids as they come through the line and reports back to the guidance counselor when something seems amiss; the lunch ladies in Kentucky who realized that 67 percent of their students went without food in the summer and retrofitted a school bus to create a mobile feeding unit which feeds 500 kids a day when school is out of session.

The other thing that happened is that, when given the chance to thank their lunch staff, kids did this in amazingly creative ways: hamburger cards made out of construction paper, flowers in milk carton vases, paper pizzas on which every kid signed a different topping. One lunch lady said to Jarrett, "Before this day, I felt like I was at the end of the planet at this school. I didn't think anyone noticed us down here." Another said, "You know, what I got out of this is that what I do is important." What Jarrett has learned from all of this is the importance of saying thank you. "A thank you can change a life," he says. "It changes the life of the person who receives it, and it changes the life of the person who [gives] it."² Jesus calls us to reach beyond our circles not just for the sake of others, but for our sake as well. For it is not just receiving grace that transforms us, true transformation happens when we extend grace with no expectation of anything in return.

In a recent editorial in *The Christian Century*, editor Peter Marty wrote, "Living a life aligned with Jesus is extremely difficult. We practice and practice, trying to get even a few basics right. It's mostly unglamorous work, as unglamorous as brushing teeth at the bookends of the day, or playing scales and arpeggios in

² https://www.ted.com/talks/jarrett_krosoczka_why_lunch_ladies_are_heroes

endless fashion while learning the piano. I'm thoroughly convinced that nothing resembling expertise exists in the Christian life. How can you become an expert at receiving the totally undeserved mercy of God on a daily basis? There's a reason we speak meaningfully of *practicing* the faith. It's all practice."³

Tables aren't just the place where we gather with the people we love and give thanks to God – which we often call saying “grace.” Tables are where we get to practice receiving and giving God's grace. God has invited us to be a part of this incredible banquet which is a metaphor for God's community the place where all of God's people come together. Jesus calls us to do more than just show up and *say* thank you for the invitation. Jesus calls us to *live* our gratitude to God by reaching out to those who cannot return the favor and share the good news that they are invited into this community as well.

Maybe, as in the story Jesus tells, the people we need to reach out to are the poor, the disabled, the blind, the lame, the ignored, the overlooked. In our time that might be the person of color who was profiled and wrongly imprisoned; the transgender person who is terrified of how government policies will impact their life; the person of a different religion who is looked upon with suspicion, prejudice, and, as we know all too well after yesterday, even with murderous rage; the immigrant who has lived among us for decades, working hard and paying taxes and who now lives in fear of being deported. Those people who hold political views so different from yours that it becomes all too easy to see them as less than; It might even mean offering grace and forgiveness to someone in your life who don't deserve it and who wouldn't do the same for you. At a time in our national discourse when politicians themselves from both parties are condoning and stoking the worst impulses of fear and violence in the electorate, this suggestion from Jesus about who belongs at God's table and who we are called to bring into the fold is something we all need to hear. According to Jesus, there is always more room at God's table and no one, not one, is to be left out of this feast.

Inviting other people to join us at God's table means we must be willing to transform the pyramid of power and privilege into a table where everything is served family style, passed around from one person to the next in a continual dance of receiving and giving, of accepting God's gracious gift and paying it

³ Peter W. Marty, “The Life of Faith Takes Practice,” *The Christian Century*. October 17, 2018. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/life-faith-takes-practice>

forward. In one of his last writings he before he was murdered, an essay titled, "The World House," Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that, for peace and equity to be realized, individuals and nations would have to look beyond their own interest and work for what is best for all of humankind. He called for a revolution of values, for the formation of "a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation." In reality, he said, this is a call "for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [people]," in contrast to the self-defeating path of hatred and retaliation. In his conclusion, King wrote, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now."⁴

King wrote those words more than fifty years ago. And while it may be true that nothing resembling expertise exists in the Christian life, if we aren't yet convinced that tomorrow is today, if we aren't feeling confronted – every time we read the news – with the fierce urgency of now, then we have more practicing to do. We all have a lot more practicing to do. Fortunately, God's invitation to us is always open. It is always *now* that we are invited to experience God's grace and love, to sit at God's table with *all* of God's children. And it is an invitation we are empowered not just to answer but to extend to others, especially to those children of God who desperately need to know now that they, too, are worthy, they also are loved, they too, just like us, are the recipients of the totally undeserved mercy of God, every day.

Amen.

⁴ From Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston, Beacon Press, 1967. Online: <http://pluralism.org/document/the-world-house-martin-luther-king-jr-1967/>

Joys and Concerns:

To come together for worship the day after yet another mass shooting in a place of worship is nothing less than an act of courage. It is also a witness, a proclamation that the grace and love of God cannot be shut down or drowned out by the voices of hatred and bigotry. Today, we stand with our Jewish siblings in their shock, horror, and grief, which we share. We stand with our siblings of every faith tradition, trusting that not one of us possesses the whole truth and that we all have something to learn and share with each other. But most of all, we stand with the God who has promised to love us in life, death, and in life beyond death; it is this promise that even gives us the courage to extend God's love even to our worst enemies, for the undeserved mercy of God might just be the last hope for our broken world. May we hold fast to this promise today and in the days to come.

We also mourn today with those in our own community grieving the loss of loved ones. With Harriet Wadsworth and her husband John as they mourn the death of John's sister Vera, and with Dan Carroll and his family as they mourn the death of Dan's cousin Tami.

And even in the midst of sorrow and loss we celebrate the joy of our fourth annual Trunk or Treat event last Friday night. This was an opportunity to share the abundance and sweetness of God's love with those looking for a safe place to take their children trick or treating or who needed a hot meal and a friendly welcome. Those who came got all this and more, including the joyous music of Bill Braun and his fellow musicians. Thank you to all who contributed candy, chili, cornbread and more, and to all who volunteered during the event.

And now, let us turn to God in prayer.

Holy and Merciful God,

We are called to give thanks to you in all things. Not *for* all things, but in all things and even, in the midst of things that threaten to break our spirits and our hearts. Today, we give thanks to you in the midst of our grief and exhaustion over a world in which it appears that hate reigns supreme. We have watched with dismay as divisive rhetoric gives way to pipe bombs in the mail and shootings in places of worship and legislation that threatens to erase whole categories

of your children and people who run from one place to escape violence and persecution only to encounter it in the place where they seek refuge and freedom and people of different views talk over and past each other.

And yet, we give you thanks for the diversity of your creation and for the differences among us that teach us something about who we are and who you are. We give you thanks for the signs of compassion as people reach out to strangers, extending and receiving grace and forgiveness; for glimmers of hope when we see the extraordinary power of love; for the marvels of the human body and the ways it brings us joy and pleasure; for tables where family and friends gather, and for your table, where your children, beloved and forgiven, gather together, where even enemies sit together and share your bounty with one another.

Having given thanks, we ask for your Spirit to intercede to give us the strength to sit in silence with our confusion and grief and sin; and then, to give us words when we have no words; words of comfort, words of forgiveness, words of contrition, words of justice, words of peace and hope and love. We sense the groaning of your creation and trust that you sense our sighs that are too deep for words. And we pray that you would send your Spirit into the places where people are hurting and afraid and give us the courage to follow your lead to reach out to those we have been taught to fear or to denigrate. Help us to see and to believe that we have much to learn even especially from those, we have labeled "other."

Open our hearts, minds, and souls to your presence in every moment. Ignite us with the urgency of now, that we may respond to your invitation to create the conditions in which your promised kingdom can become a reality. Send your Spirit of peace and comfort to those who need your healing touch, especially to the members and friends of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and to those grappling with the pain of violent and senseless loss.

In our own family of faith, we pray for Judy, David, Kim, Kristy, Sylvia, Akeya, Marlene and Paul, Rob and Lynne, Marlene and William, Deni, Greg, Barbara, Kiam and Emilee, Paul, Jeanette, and Gabriel. We pray for Harriet and the members of her family as they mourn the death of Vera and for Dan and his family as they mourn the loss of Tami. May your healing comfort peace surround them and all who mourn today.

These are the names we know, God, but there are many names whose troubles go unknown to us even though they are our friends and family. We pray for those struggling with mental illness, with loss or confusion, with suicidal despair. We pray for those whose sense of self – whether because of gender identity, sexual orientation, political views, or any other characteristic – makes them question whether they are welcome in God's house. May we live our conviction that all are welcome, that all belong, and may we connect with one another in such a way that reminds each of us the inherent value of life.

We pray all of this in the name of the one who has shown us the value of life and of death and of life beyond death as we join our voices together as one with the words of the prayer he taught us was enough, saying...

Amen