

“Who’s Coming to the Party?”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 9, Proper 12, Lectionary 17

Text: John 6:1–21

Preached July 29, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God who has welcomed you with the most radical hospitality. AMEN

What would you do if you knew you had 5000 people coming for dinner? My anxiety level goes up just thinking about it. A number of years ago, Tom, who loves to entertain and is one of the most hospitable people I know, announced to me that we were going to give a brunch at our house for my 40th birthday. He asked me how many people I would be comfortable inviting. My response? Four. The guest list he had drawn up? 55. I was panicked. How could we possibly entertain that many people? Did we even *know* that many people? How would we invite them? Who would make all those calls? Would they show up? Where would they sit? What would they eat? What would we serve? How could we possibly cook for that many people? Oh, Lord, I fretted, we would run out of food in the middle, and people would go hungry. What music would we play? My list of objections, fueled by my anxiety, grew and grew. It would be a disaster, I just knew it. Couldn’t we just do a quiet dinner or something? That’s really what I would prefer. Quiet, intimate, refined, just a few of us. Please??

But Tom persisted, because he loves welcoming people and having them gather, and almost as if by magic, things came together. A few well-placed calls meant the task of inviting got spread out, and word spread quickly...too quickly, it seemed, because before we knew it there were 70 who said they were definitely coming—and I had never even seen several of them. I was ready to just say “Call me when it’s over.” Tom was completely unfazed...in fact, he was energized. Off to Costco, and home again with a load of food and drink and paper goods. The refrigerator in the basement was crammed with beer and wine and fruit salad, the deep freeze jammed with smoked sausage and frozen quiches. A call to his brother and sister, who are firefighters and used to cooking in quantity, and they were all set to take over the kitchen. Bro. Dan, an Augustinian monk friend, volunteered to come clean the house, and within hours every surface was sparkling, and flatware was wrapped in napkins, ready for the buffet. A friend who loves music offered to take over the playlist...he had taken one look at my music collection and said, “Tell you what, I’ll bring something people will listen to.”

The day of the party arrived. I was a wreck. I was sure this was going to be a failure. I was walking around saying, “I don’t want all these people in my house. Let’s call and tell them I’m sick.” Tom said to me, “Hey, would you relax? It’ll be great. There’ll be plenty, and people will have a good time. Stop thinking so much about yourself. It may be your birthday, but believe it or not, this isn’t all about you, it’s about getting some food and drink in our guests, and helping them have a good time. Focus on them, instead of worrying so much about yourself.” And sure enough, as people began to trickle in, then stream in, I tried focusing on them and not on myself, and it transformed the day for me. In fact, it transformed my notion of hospitality. With willing hands helping in so many different ways, I began to feel free to circulate, looking to see if plates and glasses were filled, stopping to join in conversations, meeting the folks I had never met before, doubling back to the kitchen to see if I could help and being told it was under control, scooping up empties, and thoroughly enjoying the people who had come together. The music was not all to my taste, but you know what? It worked for our guests. And at the end of the day, what I had feared would not be enough food turned into piles of Ziploc bags being sent home with folks so it wouldn’t go to waste. When the focus changed from me and what I would enjoy to my guests and whether *their* needs were being met, everything changed for me. It became a party.

In looking at our life together as followers of Jesus Christ who come together as a group of believers week after week, it’s easy to forget that we come together for a banquet. We’re here for a feast. And this feast isn’t just for us. The feast is for as many people as we can invite. This story of the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in every single gospel...in fact, Matthew loved the story so much that he included it twice, in two different settings! It was a vital story for the early church. And it teaches us a lot about how Jesus understood the Kingdom of God. It teaches us about Jesus’ radical hospitality. First, we see Jesus’ deep concern for the needs of people, and then he nudges the disciples to see the same need. Jesus’ first concern is for feeding people—and not just spiritually, but physically. He doesn’t worry about who is on the guest list. If it had been up to the disciples, they would have just had their intimate circle of twelve plus Jesus sit down and eat together. They were ready to send the crowds away so they could get their quiet time alone with Jesus. But Jesus was having none of that. He invited in thousands, and told them all to sit down for supper! He didn’t care who they were, or that he had never met them before. He didn’t care that there were screaming babies, or that some of the

folks had been out in the Palestinian sun without deodorant all day. He didn't care that some of them were sick, or had trouble walking. He didn't ask whether they were divorced, whether they were gay or straight or trans, whether they were rich or poor, whether they had an education, or would end up being good financial contributors to his ministry if he fed them. He didn't count them—though it seems that his followers did. He just cared that they were hungry. And the more people, the better. He didn't worry that there wouldn't be enough. He took a laughably small resource, and with it, fed a multitude. His focus was on his guests, and on meeting their needs, and on demonstrating to them God's abundant love and providing.

Those congregations that thrive and bear fruit are the ones who approach people with that same sense of radical hospitality. A key practice of fruitful congregations is a sense of radical hospitality that springs from the hospitality that God has first shown us. Fruitful congregations are the ones who look at the multitude out there who are needing something in their lives, whether those be physical needs, or emotional needs, or spiritual needs, and who, instead of sending them away so that the intimate group of disciples can eat supper together quietly, instead say, "Hey, all y'all, come sit down on the grass! We're going to have a party!" Fruitful congregations begin to speak that invitation to anyone and everyone, and they begin to spread the invitation into places where the invitation has never been spoken before. Look around you. We have a beautiful community gathered here. But here's a question to ask yourself: Who is *not* here? How do we expand the guest list? Who else can we include? Do we tell people they're welcome, or do we just assume that because we're warm and friendly that they will understand the welcome is for them, as well?

We have an amazing welcome statement printed right inside the bulletin. And I praise God to see the ways we are living into it. I came across another that one Catholic community prints in its bulletin each week: *We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no hablo inglés. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds. We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's baptism. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion"—we've been there too. If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or who only came because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church. We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts ... and you!*

What are the things we can do not only to announce welcome and invite, but to help people know that they are truly welcome at the banquet, no matter who they are? It's interesting that the gospel writers include the detail about there being grass to sit on... Jesus was concerned not only for their stomachs, but for their comfort. As you walk up to and through this building, does our physical space welcome and invite? If a guest walks in, what are the things that say to them that they are welcome, and that we care about their comfort? And what things say to them subtly or not so subtly that they are *not* welcome or that we aren't sensitive to their comfort?

Fruitful congregations are the ones who are not limited, like Philip, by the scarcity of resources that they see available to them. The temptation is to say, "Jesus, there's not enough for everybody, so let's go sit in our little group on the other side of this rock over there, and we'll eat, and then you can come back and preach at them some more after they've gone and fed themselves." But in Jesus' radical hospitality, we take the resources we have, as small as they are, and we just start to feed people. All of them. Whoever they are. And we trust that God is going to multiply our resources. Because that is just the way God is.

How might we be transformed if we more often turned the focus away from ourselves, and began to ask about everything we do, "How does this show God's radical hospitality?" What can happen if we begin to see what we do here not as an intimate gathering to help us recharge, and instead see it as a party, a feast, to which everyone is invited, and for which each of us has a role to play in making sure the party meets the needs of the guests? Let's pray that the Spirit will give us that radical sense of God's hospitality, that concern for meeting the needs of the multitudes, that extravagant expectation that there will always be enough, and that wonderful sense of surprise when we see that there is more left over at the end than when we started. AMEN