

Dinner Guests

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 19, 2017 ~~ Thanksgiving Sunday
Text: Luke 14:12-24

I love Thanksgiving! I always have. It's one of my favorite holidays, if not my most favorite. So, I'm curious. Tell me a little about your plans for Thanksgiving this week. How many people are going to someone else's for the holiday? (pause) How many are hosting? (pause) Now, tell me about the meal itself. Do you all sit down together at a specific time with the table set and the candles lit? (pause) Or, is your Thanksgiving more of a relaxed buffet style event with the food out all day and people picking at it as they choose? Okay... Now, tell me – football or no football? (pause) And now the big question – who cleans up???? (pause)

So, it would seem that whether or not your Thanksgiving plans include sitting down at a beautifully set table or chowing down at a buffet in between football quarters, you all know what it is to share a big meal with a bunch of people. Good food enjoyed with people you love whether friends or family is always the best way to spend time together. Even Jesus knew that! It's no accident that one of our two sacraments is precisely that – a remembrance of a meal enjoyed within a close circle of friends. Meals shared, and often the preparation it takes to get ready for them, are sacred experiences in more ways than we often realize.

I still remember the Thanksgivings of my childhood with my mother feverishly baking and cooking while my grandmother perched on a stool nearby. My grandmother was already pretty profoundly impaired by what we would call dementia today, but back then she was just Gram. She had been the matriarch of the family until time and illness took away her abilities to do much of anything. But she still had one job on Thanksgiving. Gram's job was to cube the bread for stuffing and it took her hours. She did it one slice at a time, stopping after each one to clean up the crumbs. Sometimes it took her so long that we all would start to lose our patience, but still we waited for Gram to cube two loaves of bread so my mom could finish the stuffing. It was Gram's one contribution to the meal she used to cook for everyone herself. She loved doing it. That's what made it Thanksgiving for her, and now that I think about it, for me too.

Gathering friends – or potential friends, as in the case of Emery Raccoon – around the table for a special meal is indeed a special occasion even if there is no real reason to do it. That's why I loved Emery's story the first time I heard it this past summer when Becky brought it to share at our August BOOKS gathering at the beach. I had asked everyone to suggest their favorite children's books you may recall, and our BOOKS gathering in August was a time when many of them were shared out loud with our group gathered over bag suppers in the stiff ocean breeze at

Misquamicut. I loved this book the moment I heard it. First, I love that when Emery Raccoon realized he was bored and lonely he didn't just feel sorry for himself. He decided to do something about it. He decided to find some friends by inviting his neighbors to lunch! He delivered the invitations, he cooked all the food, he set all the place settings, he picked all the flowers and put them in vases and then he even cut up his own bed sheets to make napkins! Emery put real effort into reaching out to people to solve his loneliness problem.

Emery's plan worked too well. Everybody came and were having such a good time eating and talking that when Emery tried to join in the conversation no one would talk to him! Eventually he gave up trying to talk to folks and just went back into his house by himself and that's when something amazing happened. Emery realized he enjoyed his own company! It was then that Emery realized he was a good friend and discovered that he liked himself. When he returned to his guests, he discovered that they had been looking for him too because they had such a wonderful time. They thanked him and he realized he now had lots of friends, including the 329th friend, himself!

So, I love that Emery was a do-er. He didn't just sit in his house when he was lonely. He pulled his luncheon together. And then, when the luncheon didn't turn out as he expected, at least

initially, he did something again – this time he went off by himself where he realized that he was a special person in his own right. And then, he did something again in response to this new understanding of himself. He went back to see to his guests and discovered that he now had a whole lot of friends. Emery kept reaching outside of himself when things weren't going as he planned. He turned outward, not inward. He made the effort every time to change what was happening and that made him all the stronger. Emery became a friend first, and then he knew how to be friends with all the others he encountered.

Emery's luncheon was a little different from the parable of the great banquet which we read today in Luke's Gospel. This is called a kingdom parable because Jesus used it to describe what the coming of the kingdom of God was like. Luke is making a couple of points with this parable, the first of which is yet another illustration of what's called the great reversal. When you give a dinner, Luke says, don't invite your friends or family or business associates or folks who can pay you back. Instead, give a party for the people who need it most – the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lame. In other words, the people who matter the most are the people who are the most in need. Other people may look more important, but they are not. It is the people most in need who deserve your support and attention. This is indeed a great reversal of what society tells us is important. Just think about

that! Two thousand years after Jesus told this parable, its lesson – that poor people matter just as much if not more than rich people – is still relevant to the situations we read in the news or hear on the radio or watch on TV. The world still says rich people, people of privilege, people of wealth and power are more important than anyone else, especially the poor. Jesus said and taught exactly the opposite. The poor and the sick, the hungry and the overlooked are the ones who really matter.

The parable itself begins with a description of a man who gave a great dinner party and, sort of like Emery Racoon, he sends out all sorts of invitations to all kinds of people he thought would like to come. But when his servant goes out to tell the people it's time to come to the banquet, one after another had an excuse for not coming. So, the man became very angry and told the servant to go out and invite all the poor people in the streets and the beggars and eventually even the travelers on the road. The servant did this and still there was room. Yet, even though there was still room, the man said there would be no room for the original guests who had been invited and were too busy to come. They had had their chance and they blew it, he said. Too bad for them. Wow! That sounds very un-Jesus-like, doesn't it?

So what is Jesus really saying here??? Well, I think Jesus is saying get your priorities in order. Look at the excuses people gave for not coming to the man's banquet. One couldn't come

because he just bought some land and he had to go out and see to it, whatever that meant. Another couldn't come because he had just bought some oxen and needed to go and do something with them. And another couldn't come because he just got married. Well, that last one we can sort of understand, but all of them have one thing in common. The person's situation was more important to them than this opportunity to come to a great banquet provided to them with no strings attached and at great cost to the man providing it. It was a gift and, one by one, the intended guests refused that gift. Presumably these were people the man knew whom he invited first. And one by one they told him no. They didn't even thank him for the invitation. They just said no and turned their backs on this gift, without another thought. A tremendous opportunity was lost to them and they didn't even know it.

As I said earlier, this is a kingdom parable meaning it is an analogy intended to illustrate what Jesus meant when he said over and over again that the kingdom of God was at hand. What is often misunderstood about these kingdom parables is that they are NOT talking about the kingdom of God as heaven at the end of one's earthly life. That was never Jesus' intention. The kingdom parables are intended to teach people that the kingdom of God is right here and right now. In this parable of the great banquet Jesus is saying pretty clearly that everyone is invited into God's

kingdom BUT each individual has to say yes to the invitation. And saying yes means doing something. It means setting aside your own priorities in order to be open to God's. It means recognizing the gift of having God as part of your life is indeed precious and one that is freely given. But, to receive that gift and allow it to transform you and your life, you must accept the invitation from Jesus. You must accept the invitation in spite of all the reasons you might have to say no. And some of them might be very good reasons, or at least seem that way. Still, Jesus is saying, being a functional part of the kingdom of God right here and right now requires you to say yes or no. You cannot take this invitation for granted.

That bring us back to Emery Raccoon. We've already talked about Emery's valuable lesson learned from the banquet he created when he decided to do something to make some friends. He learned that he had to like himself first if he expected others to like him. He learned he had to be a friend in order to have friends. He could have blown it when he took himself out of his own banquet because he felt he was being taken for granted by the guests who wouldn't even talk to him at his own party. But, when he went off by himself – a Jesus move by the way – he quickly realized that the changes needed were within himself.

So it is with us. As we consider Jesus' invitation to be open to having God as a part of our lives right here and right now, the

first step is to realize that this invitation itself is a precious gift. And, it is an invitation to which we must say yes or no. Then, once accepted, this invitation becomes a new way of seeing and participating in the world. This invitation becomes the lens through which we see the world around us with Jesus' eyes and react with Jesus' heart. We see the poor and the sick, the hungry and the imprisoned and in them we see not people to be discarded and ignored. Instead, we see in them the face of Jesus asking us once again to consider our role and responsibility within the kingdom of God which is right here and right now.

So, as you gather for your own great American banquet called Thanksgiving this coming week, I hope you will pause for just a moment to remember Emery and his friends and the simple lesson that you have to be a friend to have friends. Kindness matters. Thoughtfulness matters. All the time, not just when you remember. Not just when its convenient. I also hope you'll imagine you are sitting down at the Great Banquet described by Jesus and give thanks for your very own invitation into the kingdom of God. Then, enjoy the meal. Enjoy the day. Enjoy the people you are with. Savor every moment. Then, the day after, get out there and do something that makes the kingdom of God visible through you. Put some money in the Salvation Army kettle. Gather up some socks and breakfast foods to donate right here next Sunday. Visit someone who doesn't get out much. Send

a card or a note to someone far away. Really see the hard-working people surrounding you at every turn – cashiers, stock people, cart wranglers at the grocery store, road crew workers, etc., etc. Really see them because they are part of God’s kingdom too. Say thank you to them and then say a prayer for them, and for yourself, as the kingdom envelopes you in that moment. Emery will be proud of you. And so will Jesus. Amen.