



2016 ODNW Investiture

Luke 14:1-11

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. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?” And they could not reply to this.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “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; and 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. But 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. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

“I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.”

There are meals that live in our memories, not because of how exquisite the food was, but because our experience with those sitting around the table was sweet and, to use the words of our anthem, because the banner that was over us was love.

One of those meals took place in my life many, many years ago in Spartanburg, South Carolina. I was at the time the spouse of a priest assigned to a small historic African American congregation in that very town. Just as in many Anglican churches in the southern United States, the parishioners in this African-American congregation were mostly well-educated professionals with good jobs and attractive, middle-class homes.

Because the parish was very small, it was a social place in which we were often invited into parishioners' homes for Sunday lunch or for an evening dinner.

While we were there the little church began to grow: not among those already within the Anglican orbit but among those who had not been raised in the Anglican Church. Our new members' lives were quite different, in fact, from the lives of our longer-time members. They did not have college degrees. They did not have good paying jobs. They did not have attractive homes.

One of these new members was Myra, a single mom with two sons, who was drawn to the Anglican Church because of its liturgy (something completely new and intriguing to her) and because of the church's acceptance of her and her two boys with no questions asked and no judgment given. As time went on Myra and her children became more and more involved at church, all of them eventually becoming confirmed. Myra then became a member of Parish Council.

But unlike others in the church, Myra never invited us to her home.

And then one summer day after about two years, things changed. Myra invited us to Sunday dinner at her house.

And so at about 12:30 in the afternoon on the Sunday we were invited we made our way into Myra's neighbourhood which was in the downtown core of the city. When we found the address of the rental house where the family lived, I found myself feeling a little short of breath for the home was in disrepair to an extent I had not prepared myself for.

We knocked at the front door and Myra appeared, threw her arms around us and welcomed us into the little living room. There stood her two sons dressed in brand new white shirts with collars, grinning with a mixture of self-consciousness and pride. I stole a quick look around the room, taking in the patched linoleum floor, the Salvation Army furniture, the fact that there were not doors but curtains marking the end of one room and the beginning of another. In an instant it dawned on me why Myra had not invited us to her house before. She had been embarrassed to do so.

There is so much more to tell you about our meal in Myra's house that day, but let me just say this: At some point, we went into the kitchen where a number of tables had been pushed together to seat about 10 of us. At some point, neighbors arrived, all African American—some very old, grandmothers and grandfathers, some younger people who were friends of the two boys—all with platters of food. At some point, we were all introduced and handed a glass of sweet iced tea. At some point we all sat down and, after holding hands and saying a prayer, began passing the food and talking all at once. And finally, at some point, a spirit of kinship came upon us: a kinship in which we all still had our roles to play—as mothers and grandmothers as grandfathers and children, as visiting priest and spouse, we all had our roles to play, but no one was more important than another, everyone was as important as everyone else.

It was sweet, so sweet, to our taste, for the banner that was over us was love.

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus is at an entirely different kind of meal. He is in the house of the Chief of the Pharisees at a gathering that would have included all the niceties and conventions associated with an important person hosting other important persons. And, of course, as Luke tells us, at this particular meal Jesus was being scrutinized, for they the host and the other guests, had heard that Jesus had been saying and doing things that ran counter to the ways of the religious establishment.

And so Jesus, our Jesus, is at a meal that is a social and religious test of sorts—one in which he both will be expected to pick up the right fork for the right course and will also be expected to pay deference to the those who were the most important people in the room.

But, as we know, our Jesus, is not very good at doing these things. For he comes with fruit that is not sweet to the taste of religious insiders or people who believe in their own self-importance. And he comes with a banner that is love, a banner that will not please those preoccupied with their own place at the table. This love is not just some vague, sentimental warm feeling, but the love of a God who has decided to take up residence in human flesh and who is particularly fond of the flesh of those whose lives (like the lives of that African American family in my story) are lived closest to ground, those who have little, if any, buffer against the vagaries of power, class, position and money.

The bitter fruit, so to speak, that Jesus brings to his meal in the Chief Pharisee's house are things like this: the healing of a sick man on the Sabbath, something that would have been forbidden by religious law, a string of impertinent questions about a seating chart for the table that is driven by who is important and who is not, and, finally, the pronouncement that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And over it all these actions, of course, is the banner that is love—God's equal love and acceptance for all, a stumbling block and bad news for the exalted in this world but for us in the church, the Good News of the power of God.

Today in this banqueting house, where we are feasting on Scripture, prayer, song and community, today, we honour a group of people who have brought a variety of gifts and a variety of ways of serving within the life of our parishes and within our diocese as a whole. Some of these ways of serving that you are about to hear are:

- serving as the parish's "mister fix-it,"
- counting parish money offerings Sunday after Sunday and year after year,
- serving on Parish Council or as a Warden,
- coordinating and organizing meals for the hungry in the community,
- working to assist refugees in their resettlement in our communities,
- creating fabric art or music that enhances the prayer life of all who experience it,
- working on the Christian formation of children and youth,
- encouraging others' financial generosity for the sake of the Church and for the world,
- serving in the liturgy, in pastoral care, in adult formation
- serving in overseas missions, serving on diocesan committees,
- working on coordinating and hosting our diocesan Synod, and
- being a peaceful and reassuring presence in times of turbulence and transition.

Yes, on the surface, all these people, their gifts and their ways of serving look very different from each other, very different, indeed. But what they have in common and what we celebrate today is they, like we, like all the saints have aspired to live and serve under the banner that is love, the banner of the love of God in Christ Jesus”: the one who came not to be served but to serve, the one whose life, death and resurrection seated us all at the table of life with him, the one who called us and calls us daily to be his kin and to be kin to one another within the Church and for the transformation of the world. Our world needs transform these days, does it not?

In a moment you will hear the particular shape of the love that these new recipients of the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster have offered to our parishes, to our diocese and to the broader community. As you hear even more about who they are and what they’ve done, you may, like me, find yourself flooded with gratitude and with sweet delight. But this morning don’t stop there. Don’t stop there. Let their gifts, their lives, their actions help you remember the love that is yours in Christ Jesus: a love that has healed you, a love that has welcomed you to God’s table, and a love that has called you to be the saints of God for the sake of the world.