

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Great Feast

July 24, 2011

**Psalm 119:129-136 and Luke 14:15-24
(Hymns – 420, 78, 534, 801)**

I did something unusual for me this week.

I went back to school.
For three hours every afternoon,
I engaged in a summer school class
out at Vancouver School of Theology offered by Tom Long.
Tom teaches preaching at Chandler School of Theology
at Emory University in Atlanta, GA.
He was helping us preach the parables.
It was a rich and rewarding conversation all week,
the fruits of which I hope will be evident for you
in the coming weeks of our continuing series on the parables.
The week reminded me yet again
of how much I enjoy the provocation of learning –
new ways of seeing things, new ways of doing things,
new ways of being in the world.

Tom reminded me afresh this week
of the basic dynamics involved in meeting God through the Scriptures.

First, you encounter the text.

Encounter is an interesting word as it relates to reading Scripture.
There is a strong sense in this word of meeting something unexpectedly,
something that sparks contention and conflict,
something that challenges the way you see things.
I'm not sure we approach the witness of Scripture these days
with that kind of expectation.
In every reading of Scripture,
we are being confronted with the impact of God's grace and mercy
on the writer in their context
and invited to consider what it might mean for us in ours.
This is rich reading that gets us to the roots of our lives.

Second, you emerge from the encounter with a claim.

It is a claim upon you.
God's grace grasps you afresh
with the power of its loving encouragement to live in God for the kingdom.
It claims you all – body, heart, mind, and soul – in service of the kingdom.
It brings you home to the banquet of God's merciful love
where you are fed for the freedom of discipleship.

Third, and finally, you are witness to the claim in your world,
in your circles of influence.

And out of gratitude for that grace,
we serve those in need in our neighbourhoods,
nourishing their souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
We are fed in order to feed others.
The claim we make in the world is that we know
where the Bread of Life, the Holy Manna, can be found
and we want everyone to enjoy it with us.
We proclaim the claim that God has made upon us
as a claim that contains the true source of authentic living.

So, we encounter the text that reveals God,
are claimed by God through that text for service in the kingdom,
and proclaim that grace in everything we do and say.

It was a powerful reminder of one of the most powerful ways
in which the Holy Spirit works with us and for us.

Let's see where that pattern of provocation takes us with today's parable.

Luke sets the story in the midst of a contentious conversation
at the table of a leading Pharisee.
It's a mixed crowd,
made up of the committed, the curious, and the challengers.

Jesus had just told his host
that he should not invite those he knows to lunch or dinner,
but the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
Don't do something to get something in return.
Do it in order to bless those who God loves.

Then one of the guests, inspired by that bit of teaching, exclaims a beatitude –
"How happy are those who will sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God."

I can just imagine Jesus wanting to make sure that his listeners
really got the point he was making,
his claim about the true nature of the kingdom of God.

So he said it again, this time in parable form.
The first invitees were filled with excuses for not coming.
The host was furious, but used his anger in an interesting way.
He shifted his focus from the friends who had rejected his invitation
to those who might benefit from the feast already prepared.
He invited the the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
And there was still more room,
so he sent his servants to bring others in to be fed.
And I sense that the host's final comment,
often read as an angry condemnation,
expressed a regretful sadness instead.
The banquet was ready.
Those invited had all sorts of excuses for not coming.
And look what they missed!

The claim on me in this parable this time I considered it,
the unexpected challenge to my way of seeing things,
lies in the recognition that the final words of the host
express deep sadness rather than angry condemnation.
The anger at the rejection of the invitation,
perfectly legitimate in the context,
does not last long and is turned into gracious action
on behalf of those in need.
God does not stay stuck in anger nor dibilitated by sadness.
He continues to extend the invitation to the banquet table
more broadly, then more broadly again.
Everyone is unconditionally invited to feast on God's grace
and thus come together in community with God.

My proclamation arising out of that claim
is that all who hunger and thirst for a flourishing life
are welcome at the table we gather around in this Brentwood community
week after week to be fed by God's merciful grace.
In the sincerity and warmth of that welcome,
people begin to trust that they belong, that they will be fed,
that they will be heard, and that they can contribute.

It's simple, but profoundly challenging.
And Jesus Christ will support us in rising to that Gospel challenge.