**Building a Bigger Table: Who’s Missing?**

**Luke 14:15-24**

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Back in 2007, this congregation took a bold step that has shaped our identity ever since - we passed our church welcome statement which reads:  *As congregants of the First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, we welcome and affirm all persons. We are intentional in being inclusive of those of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender orientations, all genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and abilities. In modeling the ministry of Jesus Christ, we shall all journey together into full participation in the life of the United Methodist Church and a closer relationship with God.*

Of course, if you once worshipped with us in person or if you’ve visited our website, you’ve seen that statement before.  In fact, many people have joined this congregation because of it.  Yet, it’s been long enough now that I wonder how many people know the story of how it came into being.

 It all started on a Christmas Day at the home of Ryan and Linda Haywood.  Ryan and Linda had become very upset by the position of the United Methodist denomination on LGBTQ inclusion.  That Christmas, at their annual open house, they were talking with a gay couple and were bemoaning that no one seemed to be addressing the injustice and hypocrisy of a denomination which claimed the gospel but didn’t truly welcome everyone.  Ryan says, “So one of the gay guys just softly said, “Well, if you two can’t change the Church, who can?”  And it just hit us like a bolt from Heaven: if not us, who?  And if not now, when?”

The next day they began organizing a small group of church members to talk about what they could do.  At the meeting, they named the group Rainbow Crossing and everyone pitched in to buy altar flowers for the next week that would be given in honor of the LGBT community.  They also started making and wearing rainbow ribbons.  By the time the group met a second time, twenty-four or twenty-five people were there.  Then, in 2005, Ryan and Linda went to our Leadership Council and talked with church leaders about what it would look like to be a welcoming or reconciling congregation.  Some months later, they were asked to bring their proposed welcome statement to the leadership meeting in two days, but they hadn’t actually written one yet.  With the help of another church member, they sprang into action and crafted a statement which was then reviewed by a panel of Rainbow Crossing members before it was sent to leadership. The Leadership Council approved it and, after a series of sermons and a number of classes and discussions, the statement was voted on by the congregation at the annual church conference.  By a vote of 90% to 10%, the welcome statement was adopted on January 7, 2007.

This is the third week of our sermon series I’ve entitled “Building A Bigger Table”.  It is our stewardship sermon series because, as you hopefully are aware, we are in the middle of our annual giving campaign.  With these sermons, I’m hoping to cast a vision for you of what FUMC might look like in the future - a vision which inspires you to pledge a financial gift to the church or even increase your pledge by 5 or 10%.  But the purpose of the sermon series isn’t only to raise funds for next year - even more importantly, it is to ground us in Jesus’ teachings and our call as his followers to build a bigger table.  The first week we looked at some of the saints of our church who have helped us expand our reach and ministries.  Last week, we talked about expanding the table outside of the church walls.  Today, I’d like to focus - just as Rainbow Crossing did thirteen years ago - on who is missing at our table.  Who might we invite to join us?

Let’s start with what we learn from Jesus about this.  In our scripture reading for today, Jesus tells a parable about a great banquet.  The context of the parable is important. When he tells this parable, it is the Sabbath and Jesus was having a meal at the home of one of the Pharisees.  As they were arriving, Jesus noticed how the dinner guests were all trying to get the best seats at the table.  Many of them were wealthy and powerful men who considered themselves entitled to be in seats of honor. Jesus, however, chose to teach them about humility and generosity. Rather than assuming you should have the best seat at a feast, Jesus said, take the least important place.  “All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”  Someone replies, “Happy are those who will feast in God’s kingdom”, assuming that those in God’s kingdom would be people like themselves.  Again, Jesus saw things differently, which prompted him to tell the parable of the great banquet.

A certain man was hosting a dinner party - he had already sent invitations and people had accepted.  At the time, inviting people to dinner and being invited were marks of a higher social status.  So, the invited guests were likely to be prominent or wealthy neighbors.  Yet, when the man sent a servant out to let them know the meal was ready, they suddenly came up with all kinds of excuses not to come.

 The man was angry and disappointed.  He decided to send the servant back out to the city streets to invite those who would be at the opposite end of the social hierarchy - the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.  Yet, even after they arrived, there was still room at the table.  So, the man sent the servant out again - this time to invite those on the highways, strangers who just happened to be passing by, so that the table would be filled.

 As we look at the story, it seems likely that we are meant to see God as the host. God is the one welcoming the last and the least, the outcast and the stranger to the table.  And we, we are meant to be the servant - sent out to invite them.  What a powerful idea as we think about building a bigger table here at FUMC!

 For Jesus, the table was a microcosm of God’s kingdom and, therefore, those invited should represent the great and beautiful diversity of people God has created - particularly those who might be forgotten or excluded.  So, the question for us is who isn’t already at our table?  Who would Jesus have us invite?  Yes, we have made sure to communicate that we are a church which welcomes the LGBTQ community.  Who else is on the outside looking in?

My first thought as I began working on this sermon was of people of color.  According to world population review, 29% of the population in Ann Arbor is not Caucasian - 17.3% is Asian, 6.5% Black or African American, 4% of two or more races, and the remaining a combination of Native American, Pacific Islander, or another race or ethnicity.  In neighboring Ypsilanti, just down the road, 61.4% of the population is white, 30.6% is African American, and 2.5% Hispanic or Latino of any race.

As a church, we have begun building relationships with Bethel AME church whose congregation is made up mostly of our African American Methodist siblings.  What might we do to strengthen those relationships?  How might we reach out to the high population of Asians in our community?  What would it look like to cross the great Ann Arbor-Ypsi divide and invite folks to our table?

A second group I thought of was young adults.  In Washtenaw County, 32% of the population is between ages 18 and 34.  I’ve seen estimates up to 42% for Ann Arbor.  Yet, the percentage of our congregation in that age range is much smaller.  What would it be like to intentionally work at bringing young adults to our table?

Here is another one.  We say we are LGBTQ friendly, but there are very few people who identify as trans in our congregation - at least that we are aware of.  At the same time, many people in today’s young adult generation now identify as a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth.  How could we be intentionally trans-friendly?

One more group that came to mind for me is people of differing abilities.  We have made a point in recent years to work on accessibility, and we now have outstanding disability awareness talks each month.  Are there ministries we might offer that would particularly address the needs and interests of those who are disabled?

There are so many people we could invite to our table - so many reasons to make the table bigger.  Immigrants, the unchurched, residents of the Delonis Center, the working poor.  The list could go on and on. I hope you will give some thought to who you see missing.  My prayer is that we will continue this conversation in the coming year and work toward our congregation reflecting the great diversity of the kingdom of God.

One more thought to share for us all to think about.  What is the difference between being a welcoming or affirming congregation and being an inclusive one?  What does inclusion look like?  What might we need to do to be more intentionally inclusive?

In the end, your financial gifts to the church support our efforts to build a bigger table - to reach out to our church family, our community, and our world. Next week, during the worship service, we’ll have a time of dedicating our pledges to God.  If you haven’t filled out a pledge card or pledged online, please take the time to do so or do it as you watch worship next week.  When you make a pledge of what you plan to give, we can plan our staffing and ministries for the coming year.  In a time which has felt bleak and frightening, your gift is an investment in hope - hope for our church, for our world, and for the kingdom of God seated at our table.

May it be so. Amen.

As we leave this place, may we strive to see all of our siblings as God does.  May we seek the poor, the hungry, the stranger passing by and invite them to our table.  And may we celebrate the gifts of all, as we seek to do God’s kingdom work in the world.