



LUKE: A PORTRAIT OF JESUS

July 10, 2016, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 9: 10-17, Acts 11:1-12a

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Today is the third in a four-part sermon series on the distinct portraits of Jesus created by the gospels. Clearly, all four gospels discuss Jesus in similar terms, but each also has its own perspective and emphasis. Two weeks ago we heard about Matthew's Jesus as the brilliant teacher who has high expectations for us because he believes we are capable of great things. Last week we heard about Mark's Jesus urgently using his power and authority to save us. Today we turn to how Jesus is portrayed in the gospel of Luke to his largely Gentile audience.

Our readings from Luke and Acts, which as our reader reminded us are written by the same author, both tell tales of people being fed by the Lord. The first story we heard, the feeding of the five thousand, is a story we have heard so many times it is often difficult to hear it with fresh ears. In reading it this time I was struck by how the story begins. The disciples have returned from their mission to proclaim the kingdom of God and they have gathered around Jesus once again. It is a time to reconnect, share stories, and catch their breath from all of their adventures. We are told that they withdrew to someplace private, away from the public's eye and the public's demands.

Alas, their private time did not last long. The crowds soon learned of their location and they were besieged by those seeking to hear about the kingdom of God and be healed. And Jesus does just that. He welcomes them, the thousands of them who have intruded into what was supposed to be a quiet moment of rest. He welcomes them when it would make perfect sense to send them on their way explaining he needs some time alone with his disciples. And when he is done teaching and



healing them, he does not graciously send them away, as his disciples very fairly suggest. Jesus bids them to stay and challenges the disciples to feed this multitude with the meager resources before them. There have been endless debates about how so many were fed with so little food to the point that there was more left over than when they began. Miraculous? Yes, but what is more miraculous to me is Jesus' stamina to continue to welcome so many without losing his mind.

In our second reading this morning, the author of Luke and Acts recounts a dream that Peter has which transforms his ministry. A panoply of different animals is lowered down before Peter and he is invited to eat. Included in this vast array are animals that are considered unclean to eat by kosher law. Peter refuses to eat because of this. But the divine speaks to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In Jesus Christ, the boundaries and limits that used to exist have been lifted; the circle of those invited has grown larger. Peter is inspired to invite Gentiles into this growing group of followers of Jesus becoming the church.

Luke's Jesus and the church Jesus has founded in Luke's account in the book of Acts are both all about radical hospitality. A party is being thrown and all are invited to the table. Jesus is the gracious and enthusiastic host in all times and all places for all people. The preaching professor, Tom Long, describes the kind of church that Luke's Jesus envisioned as a huge fellowship hall. The front doors are wide open to the street and members are on the sidewalk beckoning all who walk by to come in and join the party. Whenever the tables and chairs fill up somebody sets up yet another table with more chairs. It is like a Brick Church summer barbecue on steroids.

The portrait we get of Jesus in Luke is with his arms open wide, perhaps even wearing an apron. He is fresh from the kitchen and wants us to come and sit beside him. He cajoles us to join him, "Eat, eat, you look hungry. Come, I have some friends I would like you to meet. Let's sit and talk and get to know each other."



It doesn't matter if we do not come from a certain social class, we are invited to the party. It doesn't matter if we have not spent much time getting to know Jesus by reading the Bible or going to church, we are invited to the party. It doesn't matter if we are not sure what we believe or even if we believe, we are invited to the party. In a world characterized by countless delineations and boundaries; so many rules about who is in and who is out; so many categories and value judgments about who is worthy and who is not; Luke's Jesus ignores all of it. He just has one question for us. He does not ask us who we are. He does not ask us what we do. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus simply asks us "Are you willing to come into the party?"

It sounds simple enough at first blush. What is easier than accepting a party invitation? And yet, it is not. Jesus tells a parable in Luke of a host inviting a large number of people to a great dinner party and they all refused the invitation. Everybody who declined had a reasonable excuse. They had other important things to which to attend. Jesus also tells the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke. When the wandering younger son returns home, the father throws him a full-blown shindig. But the older son refuses to attend. He has a good reason not to accept the invitation as well. And when Peter has that dream in the book of Acts, God has to lower down the menagerie of non-kosher food animals three times before Peter accepts the invitation.

When I started writing this sermon I thought that highlighting how Jesus is the ultimate host in the gospel of Luke would be a message for those who feel excluded in some manner of their lives. But as I have thought about it further perhaps this speaks even more clearly to those of us who do not necessarily feel excluded, but have just not realized the number of invitations we have been ignoring all these years. In this Texas two-step of a dance, God is ever inviting us in that we may invite others in as well.

I believe God is continually inviting each one of us, every day, into closer relationship with the divine and with each other. The challenge for us is not a lack of invitations so much as our lack of recognition of the invitations. Recently I was



visiting with an elderly member of our congregation who lives in a nursing home. She has a degree from Princeton Seminary and has spent much of her life serving the church in a variety of ways. But due to her health concerns she has never been ordained. Her dream is to be an ordained chaplain at Bellevue Hospital where she once served as a student minister. There is not a visit we have together when she does not discuss this deep regret of hers. She is now wheelchair bound but she is still seeking to pursue this goal. Sometimes her deep regret over not being ordained and serving at Bellevue makes her feel as if she has failed in her service to God and in her call to ministry. As we continue in our conversation I ask her about her life at the nursing home. She will tell me about this or that person whom she has befriended. She will offhandedly share with me stories of how she has brought comfort to the grieving, care to the ailing, and companionship to the lonely.

I think you can guess what I am going to say next. Yes, it is at this point in the conversation with her that I point out that she is indeed serving as a chaplain right where she is, right now. She has indeed accepted God's invitation to her to become a chaplain. She just has not recognized it because it was not what she presumed it would look like. And in accepting God's invitation she has extended an invitation to others. She has reached out and connected others in that nursing home who could very well feel isolated if it were not for her caring presence. After all of those years of faithfulness she just did this without giving it a second thought, without recognizing what a gift it was. She was so used to accepting invitations from God that she accepted this one out of wonderful habit.

The Jesus we find in Luke's gospel and in the church in the book of Acts is one of hospitality and invitation. Jesus is the ultimate host and believe me we are being invited each and every day. Sometimes we do not recognize the invitation and are missing out on opportunities to experience our God in how we connect with others. Sometimes we turn down the invitations for what we believe are very good excuses. And sometimes, we are accepting those invitations and just have not recognized them for the divine gifts they are. The relationships we share with each



other, especially the surprising ones that cross unexpected boundaries, all occur on holy ground.

What we have watched unfold in the news this week has been beyond painful. Tragedy after tragedy stacked up higher and higher with no apparent end in sight to the violence. I do not know how we move beyond all of this. But I do know that it begins with getting everyone around the table. It begins with offering and accepting invitations.

Jesus Christ, especially in Luke, is calling us to receive the divine invitation to extend an invitation to others; to break bread with them, and share their joys and concerns, and remind them of truly valuable they are. Throughout Luke and Acts we watch as the circle of those welcomed in grows and grows until all the world is invited to the party. The questions for us in the place we find ourselves right now are these: Where are we being invited next? Who are we being called to invite into the party, into our lives, and our lives together as a community? And are we willing to lay aside our very good excuses for not joining the party?

The divine's invitation to us arrives each and every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.