

More Tables

Luke 14:1,7-14

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Now friends, I promise that after this Sunday I'll slow down on telling JMU stories, but with the football season kicking off yesterday, it's on my mind! In particular, I'm looking ahead to next Saturday, and the return of "The Zuber Family Tailgate!"

It's hard for me to believe that "The Zuber Family Tailgate" has been a part of my life for the last ten years. It's an indispensable part of my fall: going to JMU Football games and eating amazing food in a parking lot out of the trunk of my parents' car. That's just what my family does! I remember all the way back to the first tailgate at JMU... We had one small table, some pre-made sandwiches, some chips and dip, and the only attendees were my parents, one friend from my freshman dorm, and me. That was it. But by the end of that first season, the party was on.

"Zuber Family Tailgates" started to grow! We added more friends, more family, and thus more food! We needed to set up more tables, and tents, and chairs. Never once did the idea of capping our attendance—of turning away hungry fans—cross our minds. No, we just kept growing. Pumpkin Dip, Cookies, Ham Biscuits, Breakfast food, coffee, meatballs, chicken wings, and more... The tailgate just kept growing, we kept adding tables.

After a few years, friends graduated and new friends joined. Friends came back with spouses and some came back with children. Soon other friends moved their tailgates over to be next to ours! We added more families, more chairs, more tables, until the tailgate spanned three parking spaces! Sure, we all tailgated a little differently, but now it's one big feast. With more friends came more friends and I'm so excited to see how the tailgate keeps growing! Because over the years, one truth of the Zuber-Martin-Deacon Family Tailgate became abundantly clear.... when you have a feast *this* good, you don't turn folks away... you bring more tables.

It's exciting being a part of something rooted in abundance. It's delightful being surrounded by those who say, "Sure! There's enough. Stop and stay a while!" Even greater than the best JMU Tailgate—and that's hard for me to even say—is Christ's call to the feast of righteousness that we hear today. Our gospel lesson today invites each of us to the table of mercy and hope, to the feast unlike any other. The Jesus movement is all about an invitation to the feast for all people, where all can be fed by the goodness and love of God. It is at this table where God's kingdom is known and justice is served with equity. We as Christ's church are each being invited to a feast of abundance, where there is always enough mercy, justice, hope, and love. Yet in the midst of this feast, Christ is turning tables.

Jesus, at a meal with the powerful religious leaders, tells a parable of a meal. He reminds his followers that the feast he provides isn't just meant to be an insider affair. It's not meant to be only for friends and those we like. The feast of Christ isn't a place to jockey for position and prestige. It's not about shaming

others and drawing honor to ourselves. This feast is not meant to keep a certain crowd in and a certain crowd out. This feast is for all people, and it's especially for those we wouldn't want to invite—for those who cannot return the favor. *"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

That last phrase is striking... "The resurrection of the righteous"... It seems to establish an insiders and outsiders group, that there are the righteous who will be raised, and the unrighteous who will not. And yet our faith tells us again and again that we cannot achieve righteousness alone. This is a gift of faith in Christ who is constantly pursuing us in love, claiming and redeeming us in mercy that we might be made righteous, justified from our sins and freed to live in this new found righteousness. All of us are being pursued in mercy. All of creation, to the ends of the earth, are being redeemed through Christ's love. It creates a state of irony that in the end when we drift into believing that our works are what redeem us, and we strive for some lofty goal of "the resurrection of the righteous" then what we are really striving for is equity—God's mercy being poured out without partiality on all people, that all people may proclaim God's holy name.

A feast of life, rooted in this promise that God loves us and is relentlessly pursuing us that we might live by grace, is good good news. This is the feast to which we have been invited. This is a feast of equity—being met by a God who is fair and impartial. Equity is our final reward. And by its very nature this feast is one of abundance! Where the world values what is scarce, our God gives freely and because of it, this gift is all the more valuable in its abundance. And when you have a feast this good, you don't turn folks away... you bring more tables.

Church, I know it can be convoluted when we're talking about righteousness and justification. Luther himself wrote endlessly about righteousness and sanctification, and it's not my hope to bore you with theological jargon. I hope we simply hear today a living word. I hope we hear a word of grace for all people that transforms our hearts to welcome the stranger to join in this feast. And we are not meant to turn up our nose at our neighbor and suffer through them for the cause of Christ. We are called to be changed by this grace upon which we are feasting, and truly love our neighbors for the image of God we see in each of them. We have an abundant feast, one where we don't just need to pull up more chairs and slide down the line in feigned humility, but one where we are called to pull up more tables, open to all God's creation. The purest response to god's abundant love is our abundant mercy.

This gospel lesson reminds us today that we are not christian because we are any better than another. We all have a seat at the table, and we are called in genuine humility to not seek the place of honor. Rather we are called to honor those the world is shaming. We are called—as Christ's followers—to extend genuine invitation to those we may feel have not "earned" their place. Because there is no earning this grace that comes as a gift from God. We are called to see beyond stigma, bias, fear, and anger to know the sinner made righteous who is being invited to Christ's feast. And when you have a feast this good, you don't turn people away... you pull up more tables.

This is not such a foreign concept to us. We come each week to Christ's table, to the great feast of everlasting life, and we've done *nothing* to earn our invitation here. We come with hands outstretched like beggars, yearning for a taste of mercy, a morsel of the feast to come. And with hands outstretched, we receive. We receive Christ's body, not given *because* of you, not given *in spite* of you... given FOR you. In this bread and wine we can taste God's mercy, we know that we are God's beloved. In this meal, we taste the goodness of God. And when you've got a feast this good, you don't turn people away... you bring more tables.

We are being sent, fed and nourished by grace, to extend the same table mercy to all we meet. We're called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed, not because of what we can get out of others, not in spite of others' character flaws, but we are called to share grace *precisely* because God's love is for them. As our reading from Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Jesus didn't suddenly stop caring about the poor, oppressed, and afflicted just because we got comfortable in our pews. We are being called out of our comfort zone to meet a weary world with a feast of mercy. And when you've got a feast this good, you don't turn people away... you bring more tables.

Let's set up tables church. Let's prepare our hearts and lives to be people of invitation. We're not only meant to share the grace we've found here with those who can give something in return. I once had a colleague share that they didn't waste any time inviting millennials to church... because they don't have any money anyway. Yikes...

No. We're not called to share the grace of God found in this abundant feast because it may help us balance our budget. We're not called to share the grace of God found in this abundant feast because someone may volunteer for our favorite ministry. We're not called to share the grace of God found in this abundant feast because diversity for the sake of assimilation may make us look better in some way. We're not called to share the grace of God found in this abundant feast because it profits us in any way.

We're called to share grace because the feast is abundant and there's room at the table. We called to share grace because it is good news for all people, it upends systems of shame that say you are unworthy or unloved, and it draws all people to the gift of righteousness through Christ our Lord.

Christ's love is for you. Christ's love is for your neighbor. We are being fed and sent today in love. And when you have a feast this good, you don't turn people away... you pull up more tables.

Amen.