

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 24, 2019
Rev. Theresa McDonald-Lee

“Room at the table”

One of my favourite times at camp is the singing before our staff FLASH – Bible Study. A staff favourite song that is certain to be chosen every week is I Cannot Come – The Wedding Banquet.

This song written in the sixties is still a hit with our staff.

How many people here know that song?

I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now,
I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow,
I have fields and investments that cost a pretty sum,
pray hold me excused I cannot come!

I learned this song during Sunday School at Glencoe Presbyterian Church with Mrs. Joyce Woodgaines at the piano.

And like Sunday School children everywhere, I took great delight in changing the words to: I have married a cow, I have bought me a wife – sorry Mrs. Woodgaines!

I have sung and read and preached on this parable my whole life – but it got turned upside down for me just two weeks ago.

The classic interpretation of the parable is this – Jesus is describing a certain man – the master – who was giving a dinner party.

We are often given to understand that this man is standing in for God.

The invited guests make silly excuses, a new piece of land, a new set of oxen, a new wife, to get out of going to the banquet.

The man (God) then asked his servants to find others to come to the banquet.

When the banquet hall was not yet filled, the servants were sent to gather everyone they could find – the poor, the blind, the lame, those from outside the city to make the tables full.

A good and true and classic interpretation is that God will find everyone, especially those on the outside, to fill the banquet tables.

We are all invited into God's banquet, there is room at the table for all of us.

I love the story – and I love this interpretation.

God making room for all of us at the table is one of the central images of the gospel for me.

An image of God's love and grace and welcome.

But there is always more than one way to look at parables.

Parables invite us to look closer, move deeper into the story.

But sometimes with a beloved story and interpretation, it can be difficult to see with new eyes.

But two weeks ago, I was invited to lead the Bible study for the winter gathering of the WMS – the Women’s Missionary Society of the London Presbyterial.

We were playing with the language of the parable, considering the verbs and nouns and adjectives.

Looking at the action of the man – inviting, made us consider action of the invited – refusing.

Someone asked the question – why did they not accept the invitation?

Why did they make an excuse?

Looking at the text – you can say the reasons are right there – marriage, oxen and land.

But those are just excuses.

Some of them flimsy excuses.

Why would someone give up the chance of excellent food, prestigious company, and fine wine?

Why would they say no to the event of the neighbourhood?

This was a question that stuck with me.

Then I realized that maybe – just maybe - they had a real reason.

Perhaps at the last dinner, they felt slighted by their placement at the table.

Perhaps they were hurt by the actions of the host at the market the week before.

Perhaps they didn’t feel like they really belonged at the table or that they were simply invited for show.

Perhaps they didn’t feel comfortable at the table.

Perhaps they passed on their excuses to hide their true feelings about not wanting to come to the banquet.

To examine this question a bit further, we have to detach the role of the man in the parable from the idea of God.

Maybe this man does not represent God.

When we understand the master to be God, we know that we should be attending the banquet, but what if the parable is not about a banquet that God is throwing?

But what if this man stood in for us, for our tables, at church and camp and home?

Then the parable becomes something new and gets turned on its head.

How many times have we invited someone to church, and they have turned us down?

Or maybe a truer question, how many times have we considered inviting a friend to church but stopped, because we know the answer will be no?

I know there are times when I invite someone to consider coming to camp – themselves or their child, and they say, well, I am not really a camp kind of person.

They might go on – I don’t like camp food, we have a busy summer, it is just too far to drive.

But maybe those are just excuses, while the real reasons lie deeper.

Maybe they are worried about the cost of camp, but don’t want me to know they are struggling.

Maybe they were bullied as a child and are worried this will happen at camp to their child without them around.

Maybe their child is on the autism spectrum and they are worried that their child won't be welcome.

Maybe the child is scared of being away overnight with out their parents.

Those are all very real concerns – not excuses - things we need to consider as a camp as we encourage children and families to take part in Christian community at Kintail.

Maybe there are barriers to participation we don't see as we have been at the table for such a long time ourselves.

Maybe we forget that not everyone feels welcome with just an invitation.

This is also true at our churches.

While we might hear people say they have hockey, or Sunday is their only day off, or they wouldn't know where to sit they might really be saying something else.

They might be saying, I can't get up and down the stairs into the sanctuary anymore.

They might be saying, I'm not sure people at church will be forgiving if my child makes a fuss.

They might be saying, I don't think I am together enough for church, I am worried about being judged.

They might be saying, last time I went to church, no one said a word to me.

These are not an excuse, they are real concerns, barriers to accepting the invitation.

They are also a challenge to those of us in the church, those of us at the table, to consider what is keeping someone from the table.

To hear the unspoken concerns, to be ready to welcome with open hearts.

To ask ourselves uncomfortable questions, to allow full access to the table, even if it means making changes.

The man, the master, understood as you and I, did not stop his invitations.

The invitations kept going out wider, and then wider.

Into unexpected and unseen places, to people he had not considered the first time round.

As the song states, the servants went to search for the peasant and the pauper in the highways and the byways.

He was not satisfied until every seat was filled and everyone could feast at the table.

If this man was us, who do we need to invite?

Who is missing from the table we set?

Is there room at our table for those we might not normally see to invite?

These questions have been part of our journey at Kintail over the last dozen years.

We know, and studies confirm, that Christian summer camp can be a pivotal experience in the lives of children and young adults.

We wanted the table to be open to all.

But it can be hard to know where to begin or to know who is missing.

One thing we did know – our site was not accessible.

And so, we started.

We built a ramp to the beach, not a small undertaking if you have ever seen the large drop-off from our main site to Lake Huron.

But when we built that ramp, not only could children with mobility issues get to the beach – the ones we had thought of when we built the ramp, but older adults who had not been able to negotiate the stairs for years.

We kept building ramps into each of the cabins.

This meant all the cabins were accessible for their campers, but it also meant a parent in a wheelchair could see where their child was staying for the week.

We learned more about autism spectrum and learned how to make a week at camp enjoyable and fulfilling for our campers on the spectrum.

Then we hired some counsellors with autism, who enriched the camp life deeply and taught us even more.

Churches sponsored children who had been refugees to come to camp and we needed to know more about learning English as an additional language and the challenges of being a newcomer to Canada.

We are working on creating safe spaces for our campers who are transgendered so that they feel fully included and accepted.

Once we opened our eyes a little, we were able to see who was missing.

As we work on making sure that there is room at the table for all, we have made mistakes, and we will continue to make more but we are not going to stop this journey.

Enlarging the invitation has changed us as a camp, me as a Christian, and our staff as human beings.

The greatest gift in creating more room at the table has been meeting Jesus over and over again. For where are we told we will find Jesus?

In the poor and the lost, the lonely and the lame, the ones who are in prison and the ones with no coat.

We meet Jesus in those who are on the outside, the ones who are normally not invited into the banquet.

Turning the parable around still leads us straight to God's love and God's grace, but instead of finding ourselves in those brought to the table, we find Jesus.

As I look around a meal at camp, I see it all.

I see the child who is being raised by their grandmother.

I see the child who wears headphones to stay focused.

I see the child who loves to make jokes.

I see the child who was born in a refugee camp around the world.

I see the child who lives on a farm.

I see the child who lives in the inner-city.

I see the child who is full of courage for staying at camp for one more night away from their parents.

I see the child who is struggling at school.

I see the child who gets straight A's.

I see the child who is bullied at school.

I see the child who knows all the Bible stories.

I see the child who has never met Jesus before.

I see the counsellors who reflect all of these stories and who change the lives of the children in their care.

I see tables filled with those who would not normally be brought together, feasting at a banquet where there is enough for all and more.

I see Jesus, over and over again, in the faces of our campers and our staff.

At the table, there is room for all, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

But we must always be asking, who is missing, where can we find them, how can we extend a real invitation?

Sometimes we will be inviting, sometimes we will be invited, but each table is ready for us, there is room for us all at the table.

My friend, the Rev. Reuben St. Louis, one of our summer chaplains recently wrote a new final verse and chorus to The Wedding Banquet, that

Now God is setting a table

And we all have a place

We did nothing to earn it,

It's God's gift of grace

We're now called to welcome

All those who can't repay

When we open up God's table,

you'll hear the people say...

Final Chorus

Yes, I can come, Yes, I can come

Yes, I can come to the banquet

No trouble at all

I am bringing my wife

I have sold my cattle

I have fields and investments, I offer all of them

Please save me a seat, Yes I can come.