



February 18 – Ash Wednesday, Don't say it.

I find myself thinking about family gatherings as I read this text. There is a different dynamic that happens with gatherings with one's extended family. You know the type of dynamics, the type that lead to all of these training moments before the big day. It is the little things like, "Whatever you do, do NOT talk to _____ about _____!" There is a fear that the conversation will navigate into topics that lead to arguments and discomfort. And, if you have ever been at such a gathering and someone brings up such a subject, the room is instantaneously filled with tension.

Verse 15 is one such moment. The setting for all of this is a dinner at the home of a prominent Pharisee. If you did not know, generally speaking, the Pharisees and Jesus did not get along. They were the religious elite, the church professionals. Jesus was out teaching, preaching, meeting, and healing. Jesus and his disciples are invited into this home. It is in this context that one of the dinner guests makes the proclamation, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

You can imagine the tension in the room, people thinking, "we were having a nice conversation about the weather and approaching harvest...and you had to ruin it!" Notice what Jesus does not do. Jesus does not call the guest out or try to prove him wrong. Jesus does not escalate things into an argument of the location of the kingdom of God, or anything else political or theological. He tells a story that builds on that proclamation.

It is easy to look at the story and think, "How dare they avoid the celebration!" Yet, how often have each of us found a reason to get out of an invitation at one time or another. Each of them has a plausible reason as to why they cannot attend. Each one ends in "please mark me as excused." Society has always felt better with excused absences than unexcused, even in the Bible.

There are three details that I would like to discuss. First, all of these people were invited. We do a disservice when we think of it as if someone is roaming the streets saying, "Come now!" Those who were invited knew about the celebration. There would have been opportunity to make other plans. They did not. They were focused on themselves. It happens to all of us sometimes.

Second, this celebration means a lot to the host. They went through the work of the formal invitation and preparation. The meal is ready. It is an opportunity to share this joyous occasion with the entire neighborhood. This would have also meant a considerable number of resources for the host. In a time without freezers, it is incredible rude and wasteful to leave the host with all of this.

Last, and most importantly, the host is committed to the banquet. This celebration will happen whether the neighbors attend or not. He does not waste time trying to chase down those who did not attend. His focus turns to those who would come. There is nothing that anyone can do to stop the meal from happening. If those invited will not attend, others will be invited, brought, even compelled to attend.

This is a powerful response to the guest's proclamation. Yes, all who eat bread in the kingdom of God will be blessed, but those who are invited first might not show up. And those with whom you gather may not be the people that you expect to see. There is incredible hope in this story, as God prepares for that welcome feast where all will gather.

That is our starting point for this Lenten journey. There is an invitation that goes out to the world. An invitation to come to church, yes, but also an invitation into the world of the church. We are to make sure that all people know that they are welcomed. We are to create space for those looking for a place to feel at home.

No matter the labels that the world places on you, or that you place on yourselves, you are welcome here, with friends, all in need of a savior. Amen

Pastor Michael Schmidt