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"Guests at God's Table"

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Isaiah 55:1-9; Acts 10

What happens when you read life through scarcity rather than from God's abundance? Put simply, you see your existence as lacking, rather than full. You end up seeing life as an empty scramble for more. Because your soul's pantry is sparse, you tend to hoard what you have in stingy self-protection - for tomorrow it may be empty. You learn to look upon all of life as the struggle to hold in reserve our meager lives and don't recognize we are surrounded by God's blessings. Did you hear the invitation of God who is willing to offer us food and drink and meaning in life? What? You say you have no money to pay for these riches?

Perhaps a story would help ... When you walk through the restaurant door you notice the bright glistening of the leaded glass, the dark wood, and the polished brass fixtures. They are so beautiful you can't help but wonder whether the owner might question whether you're the kind of customer who should be there. We tend to go where we're wanted (don't you know) and that's no different whether you're at an expensive restaurant or shopping in an upscale store or even when you're sitting in church. I've been places where I felt unwanted, haven't you?

This restaurant is different though. It's clearly upscale and nicely appointed, and not at all stuffy. The lights are dimmed to give it the look of elegance, but you can still clearly see the room and those in it in the warm, soft glow of the small table lamps that shine like beckoning beacons across the room, a look that whispers generously, "Welcome."

It's then you notice the maître-d' who's been standing silently nearby, letting you take the room in; to observe all the accoutrements of a room meant to be fully enjoyed as to its dedication to detail. The maître-d' is there to run the front of the house and that includes supervising the wait staff, welcoming guests and assigning them to tables, taking reservations, and ensuring guests are satisfied with the whole dining experience. It's then an overwhelming sinking feeling hits you. What if they find out you do not have enough money to even pay for an appetizer in a restaurant as elegant as this? What if they find out how truly unworthy you are of such attention?

Nevertheless the maître-de is insistent without being pushy. She leads you toward a beautiful window seat where you can look onto the busy street. The server stands ready at your table and pulls your chair back to seat you and fluffs your cloth napkin as she places it delicately in your lap. As soon as you are settled, the server offers you an opened menu. Your drink order is taken and the server withdraws while you look over the menu and consider your meal choices.

And oh my ... such delicious food to choose from! Appetizers and soups and salads of all kinds and the entrees are described in near-poetic terms, in a way of describing food not normally considered in daily life. Such language for food elevates the expectation of the meal as though the beauty of language describes the artfulness of the food itself. When the food is served, its sublime flavors are nearly overwhelming, as though the food and drink were lovely ambrosia, something made by the gods and for the gods.

Novelist William Styron wrote the tragic novel of Sophie, a Polish Catholic woman who survives the Nazi death camps, that captures this idea. Barely surviving the camps, through the intervention of the Red Cross, she lands in Brooklyn and there meets Nathan, a brilliant but doomed savior who serves her an elegant wine as he nurses her back to health. Styron describes it this way: "(Holding a glass of the exquisite wine Nathan has bought), she takes a long appreciative smell of its aroma. Then she drinks, and is overwhelmed with emotion and says: 'Now when you ... when you live a good life, like a saint, and then you die ... that must be what they make you to drink in paradise.'" ¹ It's that kind of savoring that is demanded of the diner by the heavenly meal itself.

It becomes apparent that when we finally come to terms with the love and grace of God, we realize we are being welcomed into a world where life is savored like a fine wine and food that transcends itself becomes the fine meal with which God welcomes us as though our arrival has been anticipated since the dawn of time. In that way, we enter into God's gracious welcome not because we could ever pay for such a meal, but because God wants us to sit at God's table.

After several generations of captivity in Babylon, the tone of Isaiah's prophecies shifted dramatically. Our text this morning is known among the scholars as Second Isaiah and comes from the last days of captivity and the sun is just breaking forth where there has only been sad darkness. Where there's only been doom and condemnation, now there is hope and beauty. The poetry of Second Isaiah is regarded as the most sublime in all Hebrew literature.

Today's text is the startling offer of gracious hospitality, food and water and shelter. God's love comes in terms of hospitality? A place of welcome ... generous food and drink for sustenance ... warmth and rest.

When added together it's meant to comfort and sustain and to offer hope after the despair of life has been endured. Why does God act this way? Why does God offer hospitality and love rather than vengeance and retribution?

Abraham Lincoln pondered this aspect of the Divine and concluded, "... mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice." We could conclude from this that God is at work in God's creation to nurture such love and mercy in us.

¹ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, New York: Random House, 1976, 140

Are you worried you can't afford such luxuries? Are you afraid you'll be sent away because you have nothing to offer God in return? That's the point of the poetry! If that's what you're feeling, you are feeling all the right things. And in contrast to our poverty, God's extravagant hospitality welcomes us because the Divine One, the Great Host, wants us to come inside to have a drink on the house, and to enjoy a meal, to soak in the ambiance of the place in order to receive all these extravagant gifts as signs of God's great love.

The Bible is filled with stories of dreamers and their powerful dreams. One particularly moving dream is in the book of Acts when Simon Peter was wrestling with the young church's first significant theological issue, whether faith in Jesus could be shared by non-Jews. Remember that the Jewish faith was largely an expression of purity laws, meaning a practicing, devout Jew must keep the religious codes that regulated behavior or risk spoiling his or her practice of faith. Practicing kosher rules is the Jewish practice that comes from this kind of belief.

The dream seemed to highlight Peter's devout insistence that Gentiles (aka, non-Jews) must first convert to Judaism before they could be Christians. Jesus was a Jew and so was virtually every person who followed Jesus at this time. The non-Jew was considered religiously unclean and Peter believed they must first clean up their lives by becoming Jews.

In typical dream language of images and strange realities, Peter imagined in his dream a giant sheet coming down from heaven and it was filled with both clean and unclean animals and God spoke to him to eat freely from this menagerie. Peter was shocked by this and insisted to God that he could not bring himself to eat something unclean. God interrupted him and cautioned him, *"Do not call what I have declared clean to be unclean."* Thus endeth the lesson! Only God can enforce the rules and we are to take the leap of faith of participating with God in offering God's extravagant welcome to all God's children.

God is throwing a picnic and we're all invited ... all of us ... and no longer can we consider anyone unclean for God's picnic. Several years ago I saw my first UCC commercial that declared with great confidence: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," and when I heard it, I felt at home. I was smitten and thought to myself, "Now that is a gospel worth proclaiming!" We are all guests at God's table, a place of extravagant welcome where God no longer sees us as clean or unclean but only sees us as people who are hungry and thirsty.

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