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Luke 14: 1, 7-11
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Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

God's Welcome Table
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Do you remember your high school lunchroom—the smells, the sounds, the layout of the tables? Do you remember the food they served—the squeaky beans, the watery spaghetti, the crusty Mac and Cheese? What about the sounds—the clanking of the plates, the loud voices, the constant hum, the sound of the chairs scraping against the floor—Do you remember the sounds? Do you remember who sat at what table? How you felt when it came time for you to pick your seat? Do you remember what informed your choice?

Even to this day—just two days short of forty-six years since I first walked into the lunchroom at Murray Junior-Senior High School in St. Paul, Minnesota—I remember the feel of that lunchroom and how I felt as I looked for a place to sit down.

I think such memories are seared in our minds and our hearts because they cut to the core of the questions who's in and who's out.

I bet those questions of who is in and who is out have been present in human society since the beginning of time. I know they were important questions in Jesus' day—questions that had significant impact on peoples' lives; questions that made a difference in how people lived; questions that had the power to hurt or to heal. Life and death kind of questions.

Who's in? Who's out? The Pharisees answered, "Jews who follow the purity codes are in." By that answer they excluded the lame, the blind, the infirm and all who could not afford the price of a sacrificial dove.

The Roman overlords and their minions answered, "The wealthy, the propertied, those who own land and can pay their taxes are in." By that answer they excluded day laborers, slaves and those so poor they survived only by begging.

We, too, have answers to those questions—answers that include and answers that exclude. Around the world today people are including some and excluding others—decisions that can have deadly consequences. Shia and Sunni each have answers to the question, “Who’s in and who’s out?” as do Israelites and Palestinians. In Sudan, the Janjaweed say they are in and black Africans and those who act to help them are out. Deadly consequences.

But we don’t have to go so far from home to find folks answering questions that include and by their answer also exclude. Lines are drawn every day for all sorts of reasons. Who’s in? Who’s out? Some folks draw those lines on the basis of politics others on the basis of possessions.

We even find such lines drawn in our own Anglican Communion. There are those who say the Episcopal Church is out because we have a gay bishop in our midst.

But Jesus has a different answer to that question of who is in and who is out. Hear what he has to say:

“When you are invited to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host....But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

What does Jesus see as that which distinguishes a person? What does Jesus see as the way to exaltation? It’s not one’s wealth or power; it’s where and with whom one stands or sits.

“...those who humble themselves will be exalted.” The Greek word for humble means “low in height or status”. Think of it, Jesus is asking those who follow him, to take their place with the humble ones, the lowly ones, the low in status. Jesus is asking those who follow him to take their place with those others would cast out.

But I think there’s more to this Gospel call than just to stand in solidarity with the lowly.

I still clearly remember how I felt that day when I first walked into the lunchroom. I remember standing with my tray in hand—immobilized really—longing for someone to call my name, longing for someone to invite me to their table. I needed someone else to make that move, to take that initiative. I needed someone else to invite me to the table.

Hear what else Jesus says that day at dinner. “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors....But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Jesus is calling his disciples, Jesus is calling us to go out and invite into our midst those who have been excluded from the table. Jesus is calling us to welcome all who are hungry to God’s great welcome table.

O God, thy table now is spread,
Thy cup with love doth overflow;
Be all thy children thither led,
And let them thy sweet mercies know.