

“Travelling with Jesus: The Splendid Table”
August 28, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

I spent three years serving as a student pastor at a rural church on the North Carolina-Virginia border while going to Duke Divinity School. Every Sunday, once the church was locked up, I got in my car and turned on National Public Radio as I made the short trek home. Lynne Rossetto Kasper’s show about food entitled, “The Splendid Table” was always on. She talked about recipes, artisanal foods, and all sorts of good things. She has a voice that makes the food sound so good you want to go home and immediately dirty every pot and pan in the house making something wonderful. (As you get to know me better, you will figure out that I really have a thing about good food!) As I read today’s readings about hospitality and dinner parties, I couldn’t help but be transported back to those Sunday afternoons of listening to her. Some days, I would get home and stay parked in the carport listening to the rest of her show because I didn’t want to miss anything moving from the car to the house!

The gospel lesson today talks about two different dinner parties. At the first one, there is an etiquette lesson. We are told that, when invited, we should be humble. We shouldn’t be climbers like Dr. Seuss’s Yertle the Turtle. The advice goes along with other advice given by Jesus. For instance, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” By going and sitting in a lessor place, one *may* be called forward, but, how embarrassing to seat yourself at the head table and be told your place is by the back door near the kitchen where it is hot and noisy. It really is an odd story to link with the next dinner party story.

When we get to the second story, it is classical Jesus. He tells his followers to not simply invite the people we know, the people who look and sound like us, the people with the same level of education, and those of similar status. He tells them to invite people who will never be able to invite them back. It comes as a challenge for us. How much time do we spend talking to people who seem to be radically different from us? How much time do people my age and older spend talking to young adults – millennials we now call them – who are not related to us?

I can’t challenge you in this if I don’t live it myself. I’ve had a lot of coffee this week as I’ve met with other people. If I’m talking fast, that’s my excuse. I had coffee with a young transgender person who is trying to make a difference in a part of our city that is changing slowly for the better. I had coffee another day with a young African American man to talk about food insecurity issues and job creation in the poorest part of our city. I’m not telling you this to say, “Hey, look at me.” I’m telling you this because a few years ago I would have never done anything like this. Between being an introvert and general fear, it would not have happened.

The writer of Hebrews throws a challenge out to us. He reminds us that those who have offered hospitality – a warm smile, a listening ear, a cup of coffee, a meal – have inadvertently entertained angels. We never know who will cross our path. Think of Abraham when he was encamped by the oaks at Mamre. Three strangers came along and he offered them a meal and a place to rest and relax. It turns out that it was a sighting of the Divine. If St. Teresa of Avila is right, that Jesus has no hands and feet other than ours (and other people), then we have an opportunity to meet Jesus every day.

As I speak of going out and meeting people around the city, I realize that I leave out a whole group in our congregation. Many are living in single generation communities designed for those who are retired. Some of you have limited opportunity to get out and about. It would be unsafe for you to wander about in parts of the city that I choose to inhabit. But let's face it, you are not off the hook when it comes to hospitality and offering grace to the last and the least. I know for a fact that some of the people you live with in retirement communities are annoying! Yes, those are the people Jesus is talking about. So many just need a listening ear. And...sometimes it is hard for us to be that person because we feel as though God did not gift us with nearly enough patience.

As the church, we claim that this splendid table is open to all, but we know that is not as true as we might want it to be. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said many years ago that the 11:00 hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States. It might be here, too, if it weren't for the Packers. We don't have 11:00 worship in Wisconsin because kick-off is at 12:15 and we know that we preachers tend to run long! So we have our latest service here at 9:45 giving plenty of time to get everything in order for 12:15!

Still, we are called to be a church of many colors, cultures, socio-economic levels, sexual orientations, gender identities, amounts of ink and piercings. In other words, the church should reflect the world in which we live. The church is not made up of perfect people. After all, we are in it! But, we have driven off many of those we claim to want in our midst. We have a splendid table, but, throughout our denomination, we have not made it truly open.

Rudy Rasmus is a licensed local pastor in inner city Houston at St. John's United Methodist Church. He was assigned to that church many years ago. It is in the most desperate part of the "hood." The first day he arrived at this church that he was told had almost no members any more, he found a crack house across the street and prostitutes on the steps of the church yelling out to men passing in cars. If it was me, I probably would have thought, "Dear God, what am I to do with this?" Rudy looked around and channeled John Wesley. Wesley said, "The world is my parish." Rudy said, "These

drug dealers and prostitutes are my people.” Now, before you think, “That could never happen here,” remember that parts of Milwaukee that once were safe and places to raise families in peace and tranquility are now much scarier, and more dangerous places. The Wauwatosa of 2036 (just 20 years from now) could be that if we are not careful.

Rudy had a unique, but Christ-like way of dealing with his new church. He developed and taught the attitude and belief, “I love you and there is nothing you can do about it.” His church of prostitutes and drug dealers grew. Women got out of the life and drug dealers (at least some of them) found different ways to make a living. They started to get comfortable in their identity. That was Rudy’s signal to find another group of people who felt alienated. Back then, AIDS and HIV was a terrible scourge in that community, and many were estranged from family. They started ministering to AIDS patients and offering testing for HIV after worship services. Before they knew it, they had a huge AIDS/HIV ministry. Once again, they became comfortable and looked beyond for another group to love. “I love you and there is nothing you can do about it.” What a great way to approach life!

When you do church in that way, it is bound to get messy. I’m not suggesting church without boundaries. That doesn’t work either. I want to share a story that Rudy tells in his book, *Touch: The Power of Touch in Transforming Lives*.

When you open a church’s doors to everybody, some strange things are bound to happen. It’s just part of the deal. One Sunday morning during the 8 o’clock service, a young man came running down the aisle. The police were chasing him. He jumped up on the stage near me. He was carrying something under his arm. I wondered if it was a gun. He looked around frantically, but in a second, we made eye-contact. I smiled at him, and he smiled back. I motioned to him and said, “Come on over here and sit next to me.”

He came over and sat down. The police just watched and waited – just like everybody else in the service. I leaned over and asked him, “What are you running from?”

His big eyes looked at me, and he said, “Hell.”

He had just escaped from the county psychiatric hospital by jumping the fence. He had heard St. John’s would be a safe place for him, so he ran here as fast as he could go. I later found out that he had been smoking formaldehyde-laced marijuana, and he had been hallucinating. He wasn’t carrying a gun; he was carrying hope that he’d find safety and love.

We stopped and prayed for him. God did something amazing in his life, and he experienced God's healing touch right there. That was in the 8 o'clock service. When the 10 o'clock service began, the young man was walking out of the church as his father came walking in. They hadn't seen each other in a long time. I guess his father was desperate for some hope, too, and that's why he came to St. John's that morning. It was a beautiful thing to see.ⁱ

"The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks." "Never let your mutual love fail, nor refuse to extend your hospitality to strangers – some people have entertained angels unawares." People in Milwaukee are looking for hope. There are no easy quick answers. We will be studying, trying, failing, restudying, retrying, building relationships, failing, offering hope, seeing glimmers of the kingdom, and then trying all over again. No meteoric rise. No easy answer.

By the way. Rudy Rasmus' church of the "losers" of society got some attention from people who wanted to hitch themselves to that wagon. People started coming in from the suburbs. Doctors, lawyers, and business people who wanted to make a difference became equals with drug addicts, prostitutes, and people with AIDS in that church. They have grown to a congregation of several thousand. On an occasional Sunday, one of their members offers her gifts and provides the special music. Her name is Beyoncé Knowles. A church of losers can provide hope for a dying world. A church of losers can reflect the kingdom of God.

ⁱ Rudy Rasmus, *Touch: The Power of Touch in Transforming Lives* (Baxter Press, 2006), 148-49.