

Welcome to our House – April 15, 2018 – Abington Presbyterian Church – Rev. Diane Jamison Fitch

A few years ago, a young couple was planning to get married in California. They had the ceremony and a fancy reception all set, and the wedding was called off at the last minute. Deposits had already been made for the \$35,000 celebration, so instead of canceling and letting the food go to waste, the bride's family invited the city's homeless to dine at the fancy hotel in Sacramento.

People old and young came to enjoy the appetizers, salad, cauliflower, gnocchi, salmon and tri-tip meant for the 120 wedding guests. Needless to say, those guests were delighted with the invitation and rejoiced at their good fortune that something good could come out of a difficult situation.

This story has a lot in common with our Parable from the Gospel of Luke – the story of an elaborate banquet in need of guests. Let's take a closer look at this passage from the gospel of Luke, why Jesus tells this parable, and what it has to tell us here at APC in 2018.

First, a word about the context. Jesus tells this parable while attending a dinner at a Pharisee's house with lots of very important guests. Powerful guests invited so the host would be invited back to their parties. So, in the course of that dinner, Jesus tells the host what sort of people he really ought to invite as guests. Invite those, he says, who can't invite you back, "... the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind."

Wow! Now there's a conversation stopper! And this is where we pick up our part of the story, which begins ... "One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God." It's an effort to change the conversation to something more comfortable – or at least a little safer. Jesus' answer, both to him and to all of us, is the parable about an invitation to a special banquet.

Before we look closer at the story itself, it's important to understand the customs around banquets in those days. A person decides to host a dinner. Through a messenger he sends invitations to the guests he'd like to honor. But when first given, that invitation does not include the day or time of the event. That comes later. Those invited take note that sometime soon they have a banquet to attend. Then, when the banquet is ready, the servant quickly goes around again and tells them, 'Come, now, for everything is ready.' Then the guests drop what they are doing, wash up, put on their dressy clothes and come to the feast. And some celebrations were huge affairs and lasted for several days or even a week!

Ok, now on to our story ... In the parable, a certain man prepares a banquet, not a run-of-the-mill affair, but a huge celebration! And when everything is ready, the servant quickly goes around to tell all the invited guests to come, and to come NOW.

Then something unexpected happens. One after the other says, "I can't come!" The servant gets to hear three typical excuses. The first one says, "I am so sorry! I just bought a field I need to deal with". The second one has just bought more work animals, and he must tend to them. The third one has just gotten married – so of course he's busy getting settled. All three excuses were considered valid reasons for not attending a banquet in those days – especially one lasting several days. But, in the end, the real message is, "Sorry, but we've got better things to do!"

Understandably, the host is angry. He says to his servant, "Quick! Go into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." (vs. 22) This is the exact same list Jesus had used when initially talking about who really should be invited to the party. And in the Jewish society of that day those were the people from the other side of the tracks. They were not used to invitations to important banquets. But the master orders his servant to invite them, urgently, and to be sure to tell them what a great banquet it is! The servant does as he's told. And a steady stream of poor and needy, of tax collectors and prostitutes comes in to take their seats at the banquet.

But when the flow has stopped, there are still empty tables. Then the host instructs the servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in." Here Jesus is talking about non-Jewish people, those outside the faith referred to as gentiles. When they are asked to come, they figure the invitation must be a mistake. Why would they be invited, for Gentiles don't get invited to such banquets! So the servant is told, literally, to "*compel them to come in.*" The host wants the banquet to be filled. And the

parable ends with some harsh words – to those powerful, wealthy, invited people - “For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”

It’s hard to mistake the message Jesus is making here. God offers an invitation for ALL people to come be a part of God’s party. If you’re too busy or if you think you should be invited but think of all sort of people who aren’t welcome, then you may not be included. It’s about including others. About including ALL. Welcoming all. The least, the last and the lost. Those who by social standards are the uninvited. That’s who God is inviting.

Last Sunday was Older Adult Sunday. We recognized our older adults and honored those who have been members at APC for 50 years or more. Truly amazing! Michelle Feil shared that after the worship service, she stationed herself at the top of the stairs, so she could assist those with walkers and anyone a bit unsteady on their feet as they navigated the stairs going down to the Parish Hall. YES, we NEED an elevator to be welcoming to our older and less mobile members and visitors. And I would add, YES, we NEED to redo our sidewalks and parking lot, so our toddlers and preschool children don’t trip and fall coming to church or preschool. And YES, we NEED a new roof and updated heating and air conditioning system, so we can be welcoming to all who come here seeking a warm, dry place of sanctuary.

But our story can’t stop right there. For we are to be a House of Prayer for ALL people. Not a house of prayer for MOST people. And not just a House of Prayer for the wealthy, the beautiful, the young, and the healthy. ALL PEOPLE. Not just people who look like us, sound like us and think like us. ALL PEOPLE. And especially those who are or feel left out. Remember whose table we gather around when we celebrate Communion ... God’s table, where we are forgiven, and where ALL PEOPLE are loved, just as they are.

Friends, right smack in the middle of our busy living comes an invitation, God’s invitation to the banquet of his love. The message is: The feast is ready. Drop all other priorities and come. Come! Now! Come and be part of God’s inclusive and welcoming community. Open your doors wide and your hearts even wider. For God’s banquet is ready for us to be a House of Prayer for All People.