God’s Creating Spirit: Hospitality

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 14:15-23

One of the dinner guests said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said: ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said: ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said: ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.’”

God wants a full house and a full table. And God will go to great lengths to make that happen, as we hear in the Gospel story David just read for us.

“The bigger the table, the better”—a common scriptural metaphor for the kingdom of God. It’s a theme repeated again and again through the Hebrew Scriptures, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles. Repeated again and again, maybe because even though it may be obvious, we mere mortals have a hard time taking it to heart. And not only that, said Jesus, I mean that you are to include the very people you think shouldn’t be here. Invite the poor, and the crippled, the lame, and the blind, that is, the very people expressly prohibited from serving as priests in the Temple. And it’s not just that they’re welcome here—they are to be sought out, invited, respected, and beloved.

No matter how many times we hear that story, or other stories like it from Scripture, my hunch is that if we’re paying attention and really taking it in, it makes us a little uncomfortable, doesn’t it? Or maybe very uncomfortable…Just how big is the table supposed to be? How do we envision and experience its expansive scope?

I’ll share with you that my experience of the Lord’s Table has shifted considerably during the pandemic. You know, when COVID-19 plunged us into on-line worship mode from one week to the next last year, a great debate was stirred up in the United Methodist Church about the appropriateness of on-line communion. There were already pastors doing it. It expanded the reach of the church, they maintained. It made the table bigger and more inclusive. I’ll confess to you that I thought they were way off base. People who know me and know that I’m not a techie,
that I don’t do social media, that my very old phone is far from a “smart” phone, will probably not be surprised to hear this. Gotta be in person. Gotta taste the bread. Gotta look your fellow worshipper in the eye.

And then the first pandemic Communion Sunday came. And, I’m grateful to say that what I believe was God’s Creating Spirit messing with me, in a good way, I knew that withholding the sacrament from God’s people for any reason, no matter how tried and true my position had seemed, no matter how many experts and teachers of worship and theology I could line up to justify my rigid boundaries and narrow thinking, I knew that God’s Creating Spirit could overcome, would overcome and find new ways to restore life and wholeness and hope.

That first Sunday in April last year, I made it through the liturgy and words of consecration. And then, as he will again today, Ty played “One Bread, One Body, One Lord of all. One cup of blessing which we bless. And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one Body in this One Lord.” And I knew in that moment, that God’s hospitality was creating a new Body, a new wholeness, a deeper oneness with one another through our Risen Lord.

Over these last months, I’ve heard from a variety of you about your experiences of the sacrament in our online worship. As you might expect, we are not of one mind. Is anyone surprised to hear that? Some have never tried it. It just feels too awkward. Some have tried it and not gotten much out of it. Still others have been surprised at what a powerful experience it is for them. How the sacrament has taken on new depths of meaning for them. How they are indeed drawn into a new kind of closeness with one another and with God.

So where are we 15 months into this new thing that God is doing? I believe a couple of things now that might seem contradictory, but I think that’s because my categories and ways of thinking were too small, too narrow and even judgmental before God’s Creating Spirit found a way in.

On the one hand, we can hardly wait for the day when we can all be together again to share in this holy meal which Jesus gave us to remember him.

And on the other hand, there are folks joining online who can’t be here in person, due to age or work or family schedules or travel or a new baby in the home or because they’re a caregiver for a spouse or a parent... there are folks joining us online from across the country, from around the world, at different times during the week. The Body of Christ is not bound by day or time or space.

Who was I to think otherwise? Remember how the prophet said: “God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”
So, humbly now, let’s again get ready. Whoever we are. Wherever we are. Let’s prepare our bread and cup and expect that the Risen Christ will be present and that God’s Creating Spirit will once again work in us to bring new life, to stretch our hearts wider, to open our eyes and our minds, drawing the circle wide and wider still...God’s Creating Spirit--doing a new thing, even now.

Thanks be to God.