

Sermon #10
Year C Proper 17
Luke 14: 1-7

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to you, O Lord my strength and my redeemer and on yet another Sunday morning when we grieve a shooting rampage in Texas, may you change the hearts of those who will change the laws which make these tragedies too commonplace. Amen

Good morning. I'm glad you're here because it's Labor Day weekend when we honor those who work and the dignity of labor and this is an easy holiday to spend somewhere else. As someone who feels summer begins when she goes to the beach for the first time, which for me was last week on Martha's Vineyard, I have nothing to say about summer's end or the shocking appearance of chrysanthemums at the Acme. But children are going back to school, and life is revving up again after a relaxed few months, so let's make the most of summer's remaining days—all 22 days of them-- and savor its dwindling sweetness.

Jesus was good at savoring, especially meals and wine. In thinking through this sermon I realized that we often skip right by the fact that the heart of his ministry was often most vibrant and alive at table with friends.

"On the night before he died, Jesus broke bread." As he had throughout every day

of his life, Jesus gave himself to us....in his body and with his life's blood. At God's table, we are all one in Christ and he is among us. Jesus wouldn't have it any other way.

We affirm that every Sunday when the priest says, "This is God's table. All are welcome here." Each time I hear that a quiet shout of "Yes!" reverberates inside me.

Yes, this is the kingdom of God here on earth which nourishes, transforms, and sustains us in the breaking of the bread.

And in the kingdom of God, there are no outsiders *all* are invited to the feast. This is at the heart of Luke's gospel reading today.

Tim Shister points out in his book, *A Meal with Jesus*, that meals in Jesus' time were highly stratified. Roman meals adhered to a rigid social hierarchy. Jewish meals did too, compounded by the strict Levitical laws that made it essentially impossible for Jews to eat with Gentiles.

This is why Jesus' words in Luke's gospel were radical and subversive. He said don't eat with your friends, eat and include strangers, the poor, your enemies.

Thus the intimacy of a simple meal becomes a radical act and where we find the kingdom of God. For me, this happened in Tunisia, quite unexpectedly. While still in seminary in 2009 I attended a conference on “Decent Care,” an innovative way of expanding global health care. A small group of Episcopalians me to have a Eucharist one night but the priest who had planned to be there couldn’t be found. “Couldn’t you do it?” an African woman asked insistently. Well yes and no. I was a student, not a priest, and this would be unofficial, unauthorized, but I sensed an urgency in her that demanded a response. We found some stale bread and some cheap red wine and gathered in my hotel room. We were seven strangers from different countries, and patched something together from my *Book of Common Prayer*, and out of nowhere, and across all boundaries, lifted ourselves up to Christ, and in doing so, to each other. It was a moment when we strangers became one.

Everyone left afterwards but the African woman who lingered at the doorway as we said goodbye.

“My brother died of AIDS a year ago today in Africa. I couldn’t go to his funeral because I was working in Geneva. This felt like his memorial service for me.” I invited her back in to tell me her story.

This, I realize, is at the heart of the Eucharist—even one that is ad hoc. We find that as we extend an invitation to each other, through and in Christ, a oneness and completeness unlike any other.

Last August, it happened again in the pediatric intensive care unit at Children’s Hospital where I work as a chaplain. Max, a magical five year-old boy, who loved making slime and the Japanese cartoon characters called the “Glitter Force Power Rangers” was close to death. I was sitting with his grandfather in the family room as we tried to hold the enormity of what was unfolding.

“I’m sorry he won’t make it until his birthday. Max loved birthdays.”

“When is it, I asked?”

“He turns six at the end of the month.”

“Why don’t we have it today?” I suggested, knowing that while still aware, Max had no idea of what day or week it was.

“Do you think we could we get a cake?” his grandfather asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sure we can,” although I wasn’t really sure at all.

“Could you? I’ll tell his mom.”

I went to the cafeteria, borrowed \$20 from a friend and bought an ice cream cake. I asked – sure it would be impossible—if someone could write “Happy Birthday, Max” on the cake. Yes in fact, the Muslim woman who was a cashier could decorate cakes and when she finished with a customer, she did.

Back upstairs in the ICU, Max’s mother stepped outside of his room. I handed her the cake knowing that this was the last birthday cake she would ever serve her son.

We all sang. Max sat up as the cake was placed before him in bed. His big brother said “Max, it’s your birthday! Here’s your cake! Max plopped a fist right into it, making a mess of the frosting. We all clapped.

Max’s dad, with few clicks on his phone somehow made music play through the hospital TV, filling the room with the sounds of Lionel Richie, one of Max’s favorites.

There are not words to convey the grace that filled that somber room of beeps and machines. We were at table, transformed--Jewish grandparents, a Christian mom, an ice cream cake decorated by a Muslim woman that became a sacramental feast of love, even though no one called it that.

All we knew was that for a moment, love felt bigger than imminent death and everyone in that room was happy especially Max with ice cream cake and frosting all over his face and hands. AMEN