

February 13, 2022 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 9:10-17, Acts 11:1-12a

"Luke: A Portrait of Jesus"

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Welcome to week three in this four part sermon series on the distinct portraits of Jesus created by the gospels. Two weeks ago we heard about Matthew's Jesus as the brilliant teacher who has high expectations for us because he believes we are capable of great things. Last week we heard about Mark's Jesus urgently using his power and authority to save us. Today we turn to how Jesus is portrayed in the gospel of Luke to his largely gentile audience.

Our readings from Luke and Acts, which were written by the same author, both tell tales of people being fed by the Lord. The first story we heard, the feeding of the five thousand, is a story we have heard so many times it is often difficult to hear it with fresh ears. In reading it this time I was struck by how the story begins. The disciples have returned from their mission to proclaim the kingdom of God and they have gathered around Jesus once again. It is a time to reconnect, share stories, and catch their breath from all of their adventures.

We are told that they withdrew to someplace private, away from the public's eye and the public's demands.

Alas their private time did not last long. The crowds soon learned of their location and they were besieged by those seeking to hear about the kingdom of God and be healed. And Jesus does just that. He welcomes them, the thousands of them that have intruded into what was supposed to be a quiet moment of rest. He welcomes them when it would make perfect sense to send them on their way explaining he needs some time alone with his disciples. And when he is done teaching and healing them he does not graciously send them away, as his disciples very fairly suggest. Jesus bids them to stay and challenges the disciples to feed this multitude with the meager resources before them. There have been endless debates about how so many were fed with so little food. Miraculous? Yes, but what is more miraculous to me is Jesus' stamina to continue to welcome so many without losing his mind.

In our second reading this morning the author of Luke and Acts recounts a vision Peter has which transforms his ministry. A panoply of different animals are lowered down before Peter and he is invited to eat. Included in this vast array are animals that are considered unclean to eat by kosher law. Peter,

refuses to eat because of this. But the divine speaks to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In the Jesus Christ we find in Luke the boundaries and limits that used to exist have been lifted, the circle of those invited has grown larger. Peter is inspired to invite Gentiles into this growing group of followers of Jesus becoming the church.

Luke's Jesus and the church Jesus has founded are both all about radical hospitality. A party is being thrown and all are invited to the table. Jesus is the gracious and enthusiastic host in all times and all places for all people. Tom Long once described to me the kind of church that Luke's Jesus envisioned as a huge fellowship hall. The front doors are wide open to the street and members are on the sidewalk beckoning all who walk by to come in and join the party. Whenever the tables and chairs fill up somebody sets up yet another table with more chairs. Picture a Rally Sunday Barbecue on steroids.

The portrait we get of Jesus in Luke is with his arms open wide. Wearing an apron, he is fresh from the kitchen and wants us to come and sit beside him. He cajoles us to join him, "Eat, eat, you look hungry. Come, I have some friends I would like you to meet. Let's sit and talk and get to know each other."

It doesn't matter if we do not come from a certain social class, we are invited to the party. It doesn't matter if we have not spent much time getting to know Jesus by reading the Bible or going to church, we are invited to the party. It doesn't matter if we are not sure what we believe or even if we believe, we are invited to the party.

In a world characterized by countless delineations and boundaries; so many rules about who is in and who is out; so many categories and value judgments about who is worthy and who is not; Luke's Jesus ignores all of it. He has just one question for us. He does not ask us who we are. He does not ask us what we do. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus simply asks us "Are you willing to come into the party?"

It sounds simple enough at first blush. What is easier than accepting a party invitation? And yet, it is not. Jesus tells a parable in Luke of a host inviting a large number of people to a great dinner party and they all refused the invitation. Everybody who declined had a reasonable excuse. They had other important things to which to attend. But they miss the party. Jesus also tells the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke. When the wandering younger son returns home, the father throws him a full blown shindig. But the older son

refuses to attend. He has a good reason not to accept the invitation as well. But he misses the party. And when Peter has that dream in the book of Acts, God has to lower down the menagerie of non-kosher animals three times before Peter accepts the invitation.

When I started writing this sermon I thought that highlighting how Jesus is the ultimate host in the gospel of Luke would be a message for those who feel excluded in some manner of their lives. But as I have thought about it further perhaps this speaks even more clearly to those of us who do not necessarily feel excluded but have just not realized the number of invitations we have been ignoring all these years. In this Texas two-step of a dance, God is ever inviting us in that we may invite others in as well.

I believe God is continually inviting each one of us, every day, into closer relationship with the divine and with each other. The challenge for us is recognizing the invitations and accepting them.

Once, I was visiting with an elderly member of a previous congregation who lived in a nursing home. She had a degree from Princeton Seminary and had spent much of her life serving the

church in a variety of ways. But due to her health concerns she had never been ordained. Her dream was to be an ordained chaplain at Bellevue Hospital in New York where she once served as a student minister. There was not a visit we had together when she did not discuss this deep regret of hers. She had a whole host of serious health challenges but she never stopped pursuing this goal. She would sometimes express the feeling that not being ordained made her feel that she had failed in her service to God. Every time we visited I would ask her about her life at the nursing home. She would tell me about this or that person she had befriended. She would offhandedly share with me stories of how she had brought comfort to the grieving, care to the ailing, and companionship to the lonely.

I think you can guess what I am going to say next. Yes, it is at this point in the conversation that I would point out that she was indeed serving as a chaplain right where she was. She had indeed accepted God's invitation to become a chaplain. She just had not recognized it because it was not what she presumed it would look like. And in accepting God's invitation she had extended an invitation to others. She had reached out and connected others in that nursing home relieving their own isolation. After all of those years of faithfulness she just did

this without giving it a second thought, without recognizing what a gift it was. She was so used to accepting invitations from God that she accepted this one out of wonderful habit.

The Jesus we find in Luke's gospel is one of hospitality and invitation. Jesus is the ultimate host and we are being invited each and every day. Sometimes we do not recognize the invitation and are missing out on opportunities to experience our God in how we connect with others. Sometimes we turn down the invitations for what we believe are very good excuses. And sometimes, we are accepting those invitations and just have not recognized them for the divine gifts they are. The relationships we share with each other, especially the surprising ones that cross unexpected boundaries, all occur on holy ground.

Jesus Christ, especially in Luke, is calling us to receive the divine invitation to extend an invitation to others; to break bread with them; share their joys and concerns; and remind them of truly valuable they are. Throughout Luke and Acts we watch as the circle of those welcomed in grows and grows until all the world is invited to the party. The questions for us in the place we find ourselves right now, are these: Where are we being invited next? Who are we being called to invite into the

party, into our lives, and our lives together as a community?

And are we willing to lay aside our very good excuses for not accepting the invitations?

The divine's call to us arrives each and every day. My advice? Don't miss the party.

Thanks be to God. Amen.