

**Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: *Having Food to Share with a Hungry World***

**Matthew 5:1-12**

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**Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner**

A couple years ago a book came out titled "*unchristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity and Why it Matters*". It details the results of a survey about people's attitudes toward Christians and the church. The people surveyed were mostly 16-29, Christian and non-Christian. They discovered that the majority of the people surveyed have a negative impression of the church. Over half of respondents claimed that Christians were too judgmental, too politically partisan, hateful of certain populations, and hypocritical.

Many of the people surveyed also made a sharp distinction between the way Christians act and the way Jesus acted. Let's just say that Jesus had a much better reputation than Christians. These perceptions from the public lead me to wonder what kind of God people think that we worship?

Over the last several weeks, we have been talking about *creating a place for all to belong*. We have heard how Jesus first invitation is to "come and see" what God is up to. We've asked the question of ourselves, "Are we really as friendly as we think we are?" We've heard how Jesus invites people to take part in what God is up to by being his disciples and practicing hospitality.

This morning's gospel reading is from a section of Matthew called the Beatitudes, which means blessings. The beatitudes give us a map to see where God is leading us and who it is we should expect to show up when we create a place for all to belong. The beatitudes give us a God-centered view of humanity and move us from Walmart greeter hospitality to kitchen table hospitality.

Let me explain a little further. I think our culture is great at first impression welcoming. I think of the retired man who greets at Walmart and hands you a cart with a smile as you walk in or the Kwik Trip clerk who finishes your transaction with "See you next time." These are nice touches on what is otherwise a fairly mundane and necessary act, but they don't really leave a lasting impression. Can you remember what the last person who greeted you at a store looked like? This kind of hospitality can easily be our default mode as well, at church and in our daily lives. Yet, this kind of hospitality is only a doorway into a deeper and more meaningful interaction with others and with God. Jesus sets these beatitudes in front of us as a window into a relationship that transforms both host and guest. This is the type of hospitality that can't happen in a fleeting moment. Deep gospel hospitality happens best around a kitchen table, where we share a meal and people are blessed by one another's stories.

When I was in middle school, my family had a secret, a story we were afraid to let other know about. And for a year or so, even my sister and I didn't know what it was. We just knew something was a little different around the house. The secret was that my dad was an alcoholic. He had been sober for 12 years, but he had fallen off the wagon in a big way. He went to rehab a couple of times in a year, but it never seemed to be sincere. I remember feeling like our whole house was cloaked in shame.

In public, everything looked just fine. My mom was working on her bachelor's degree to become a teacher. My dad had a good job as a recreational therapist. We went to church every Sunday. Both of my parents taught Sunday School. My dad was on the church council. One day, the secret and the shame were exposed in broad day light. The story was out. My dad and a friend of his robbed a store at gun point, then led police on a high speed chase. He spent the next two and a half years in prison and my parents were divorced.

The day after the robbery my mom tossed the newspaper at my feet. On the front cover there was a half page picture of my dad being arrested, face down on the pavement. I was so afraid of this story getting out. Now I was so afraid that I would be labeled an outcast, that my friends and the whole community would treat my family like lepers. I knew my family was broken in a serious way and now everyone else knew too.

What surprised me though was how God showed us blessing in the midst of brokenness. Our spirits were broken, our hopes for stability and self-reliance were shattered, but it was not the final act and it would not define us. As we stood in the darkness of that experience, others came and set a table of hope and belonging in front of us. Families from my youth group brought meals, anonymous money showed up in our mail box to help us pay the bills while my mom looked for a teaching job, and people embraced us and invited us to their homes for meals, for words of encourage and a reminder of who God had made us to be. We were protected with the blessings of community and there we saw heaven come to earth as we and those that cared for us were made more whole through this journey.

When we live under a veil of secrecy, we live in isolation. But when we live in truth darkness is exposed and God is revealed. This gives way to life giving, God-given relationships, where both host and guest come into close contact with God's kingdom. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman wrote, "The scandal of the gospel is that God gives a future of hope to a people who are in the grip of despair."

Lisa Kipp has a story about how one person she knows found hope and joy in a simple invitation from Zumbro.

*A member of our extended family has lived a tough life for the past twenty years or so. He's severed relationships within his family, battled with depression, and been homeless*

*for a few years. About a year or so ago he moved into the Francis House just down the street from Zumbro. The Francis House is an apartment complex for individuals at risk for homelessness. I'm guessing that the folks living there don't get many invitations to neighborhood parties. But, they did get an invitation and meal tickets from Zumbro, inviting them to come to the Bluegrass Block Party we were hosting this past September.*

*Well, it wasn't long after my family and I showed up to the block party, that our relative showed up, too. I can honestly say that I have never seen him so happy. He pulled the invitation out of his pocket to show me and said, "Look, Lisa, I was invited. And I have tickets for free supper, too." We had an extra lawn chair and so he sat down with us and the friends we were sitting by. He played with my youngest son for most of the time and they both had a lot of fun. When we all decided to go and get our dinner, he joined us all in line, telling several people, with pride, that he had a meal ticket that had been given to him. He loved the meal and enjoyed the music, but mostly I watched him as he sat in the circle of lawn chairs, happy as could be that he had somewhere to be that evening. That night, he had somewhere to belong. And it was all because someone took the time to walk over to the Francis House and invite him to dinner.*

I thank God that someone believed it would be worth inviting our neighbors to the Bluegrass Block Party last fall. I also thank God that Lisa's relative really believed that he was welcome, I wonder what kind of place we could create for him at Zumbro on an ongoing basis. I often think of those who still haven't heard God's invitation to a meal of hope in the church...who still believe the church is just a bunch of judgmental, self-righteous people. What about the people no one has told that they belong or worse have implicitly or explicitly are told they **don't** belong.

The beatitudes point us to places and people God blesses while the world curses and condemns. We may even be cursed or condemned for welcoming these folks, but inviting the weak to be a part of the community does not make us weak. Rather in faith we gain strength and hope. Remember what Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. These are not superstars, the rich or the famous. God's blessings are showered on people whose faces are turned toward God in need of healing, of redemption, of forgiveness and mercy. These are sometimes faces we see in our neighbors, our co-workers, our family, or even when we look in the mirror and see ourselves. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

The world may consider these people losers, but God sees them as precious and blessed. Let's face it, these aren't outcasts or lepers. They are you and I, they are people we love and care for. They are children who are in our schools on the free and reduced lunch program that we will serve by providing backpacks of food for the weekend because

many of them won't eat otherwise. They are people who are served by Interfaith Hospitality Network who are in need of mercy and care as they experience turbulence in their lives...many of them just arriving in Rochester without any resources or connections. They may be a friend who has recently lost a spouse or is dealing with a new medical diagnosis.

As Christians, we have food to share with this hungry and hurting world. We have a table of hope to share with the lost, the least and the lonely because God shares the same table with us when we are in need. People in our world are hungry for forgiveness, for healing, for peace. Imagine what the world would look like if the church was known as the place that serves up this kind of fair, rather than judgment, politics, prejudice and hypocrisy. Imagine who would stream into the church if we dared to live out this kind of hospitality and welcome.

Jesus makes it clear that the church is where hungry people can come to share their burdens, shed light on their darkness, be themselves and be fed and filled. When we open ourselves to this kind of hospitality, where we take time to sit down at the table with God's blessed ones, you just never know who might show up. It will challenge our assumptions, our conventional ways, our perceptions of strangers; but it will also open our eyes to the transformative power of God in our midst. And we might just be blessed by a glimpse of God's kingdom at work in our lives. Amen.