

Faith Mennonite Church  
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## **The Great Banquet, South Carolina, and the Supreme Court** *Luke 14:7-24*

Garrison Keillor often begins his weekly monologue with the line, “It’s been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone.” It’s been anything *but* quiet in our country and world for the past 10 days. A week ago Thursday morning as I checked my email I saw references to South Carolina but didn’t open or read them because I had a busy day ahead as I anticipated the beginning of our Central Plains Conference Annual Meeting, weekend house guests, the arrival of my sister on Saturday, and then a departure for a brief trip to Michigan on Sunday to visit my mother. It was only when I turned on the radio as I drove to the church office that morning that I heard the news of the great tragedy in Charleston the night before. Nine African Methodist Episcopal church members gunned down in the midst of a Bible study by a young white supremacist who had spent an hour in their midst. Lord, have mercy.

As a member of the board of the Minnesota Council of Churches I received numerous group emails in the succeeding days from Executive Director Peg Chamberlin with various denominational statements of concern and support, and commentary on what had happened and how to interpret and speak of these events. But the combination of the annual meeting and precious time with my mother meant that I did not open and read most of these messages. Rather I have been carrying this tragedy quietly, prayerfully in my soul.

Then in back-to-back days this week, the Supreme Court handed down two monumental decisions: one upholding the Affordable Care Act, ruling that subsidies for insurance purchased on the national healthcare exchange are constitutional; the other legalizing same-sex marriage in all 50 states. While many were just beginning to celebrate, news broke of a new spate of international terrorist attacks, this time in France, Kuwait and Tunisia. We mourn, we celebrate, and we mourn.

Many words, many of them eloquent, self-reflective and probing, have been written and spoken about each of these events in this brief but momentous period of time. I have felt inadequate to know what to add to those conversations, but when I was in the garden pulling weeds on Friday evening and thinking of the parable of the Great Banquet—our parable for today—I began making connections between the parable and the recent events, and their underlying dynamics.

Two weeks ago Joan Kreider spoke with the children about the meaning of “kingdom” since Jesus began many of his parables by saying “the Kingdom of God (or Heaven) is like... In our reading from Luke this morning, Jesus doesn’t directly speak of the Kingdom, but the final section, which contains the actual parable, comes in response to an outburst from one of the guests about “eating bread in the kingdom of God!” Throughout both the Old and New Testament, prophets, psalmists, and Jesus envision the fullness of God’s kingdom as a great banquet. Why do you think this is? (Plentiful food *for* all that nourishes and gives pleasure; celebration; community)

But what wasn’t right with the banquet that Jesus had been invited to? (Schmoozing, social networking and back-patting; status-seeking; pay back) What correctives did he suggest? (Take a lower place/position; invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.)

The poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are mentioned on two occasions in the same order in this passage. What did these four have in common? What is their connection to one another? (total dependence on others; lack of mobility—geographic and social; stigma – “who sinned?”)

It strikes me that the commonality between this parable and the events we have been observing has to do with privilege and power, or the lack thereof. About who is “in” and has access to resources and status, and who is “out,” left to fend for themselves. Jesus’ vision of the Great Banquet is that *all* get invited, even compelled to participate, but that no one enters with more privilege, position, or power than another.

Jesus no doubt made his host and fellow guests squirm just a bit. Or maybe a big bit. The exclamation “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” seems to be one of those nervous outbreaks when someone wishes to simplify a complex problem or keep the peace by sweeping conflict or injustice under the rug. When we discussed this passage in our Tuesday text group a couple weeks ago, our wise elder Dick Westby, exclaimed, “We shouldn’t read this in church!” I think he was meaning – this might make us *all* feel uncomfortable. Which one of us isn’t busy—with our profession, our property(ies), and our relationships? Who among us doesn’t become uncomfortable when we are called to recognize our privilege, when we are called to do the difficult work of understanding the legacy of slavery and the perpetuation of racial segregation in our society?

But in God’s kingdom, God’s economy, the good news is that “bad news is good news!” It does no good to seek comfort if our actions are causing someone else pain and we’re not willing to change. But facing our brokenness, our complicity (the bad news), becomes an invitation to receive God’s grace (the good news) and to venture into a banquet hall where we sit elbow to elbow with the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. In our day these may be the homeless, the undocumented, those with mental and emotional illness, those who have a prison record, those who are profiled for the color of their skin or religious affiliation, those who have experienced generational poverty. Whatever temporary pain, discomfort, or inconvenience these relationships might bring will never come close to the pain that the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston has experienced, or the pain we witnessed at the Central Plains Conference Annual Meeting during a Skype conversation with Pastor Max Villatoro deported to rural Honduras earlier this spring, while his family was present with us looking on.

But we’ve seen the joy that comes when health care is accessed by millions of previously uninsured persons in our country, when the blessing and commitment of marriage is extended to all who seeks its shelter and affirmation. These are not *the* Kingdom of God, yet they encourage us to continue to seek a bountiful banquet for all. We celebrate, we mourn, and we celebrate! Let us continue to plant mustard seeds (our parable on June 14) of the kingdom as we await the Great Banquet.