Scripture: Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. **2** He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; **3** he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. **4** Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. **5** You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. **6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Scripture: Matthew 22

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: **2** 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. **3** He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. **4** Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." **5** But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, **6** while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. **7** The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. **8** Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. **9** Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." **10** Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Sermon:

Last week, with the help of Deacon Mary Beth, we were able to start our sermon series regarding The Table. We looked at the idea of objects having spiritual power, and seeing things with new eyes. We were introduced to the idea of being encouraged to share the Table with others as we were given the example of Paul who encouraged the Corinthians to share communion with

“outsiders”. We were reminded that at God’s table everyone has their name on a place card. We are all invited. So, what does it look like for us to really live into welcoming people to be our guests at the table?

Now I have to admit when we first came up with this title for our sermon series “Be Our Guest: Feeling Welcome at God’s Table”, I immediately thought of the fabulous “Be our Guest” from Disney’s 1991 cartoon “Beauty and the Beast.” Take a listen: “It is with deepest pride and greatest pleasure that we welcome you tonight. And now we invite you to relax, just pull up a chair, as the dining room proudly presents…your dinner. Be our guest. Be our guest. Put our service to the test.” Words also include: “Why we only live to serve? The dinner here is never second best.” Then we hear, “Life is so unnerving for a servant whose not serving. He’s not whole without a soul to wait upon.” But don’t worry, it gets exciting again, “We want the company impressed. Course by course one by one til you shout enough I’m done. Be our Guest.” My mind can excitedly translate this to what it means to open God’s table to all, which I’ll share later on in this series.

Our main scripture today from Matthew speaks much like “Be Our Guest” in its parable. Titled “The Great Supper”, this parable truly needs to be translated for its true meaning to understand why people act the way they do.

In the parable or fable, participants are invited to a Wedding Feast for the King’s son (translated to Jesus’s marriage to the church at Jesus's second coming). The guests who were invited would have received the invitation with much time in advance and would have RSVP’d their attendance. Then when the day came, and the people of the king were sent to remind those who had RSVP’d to the feast, as was customary, the attendees declared their unwillingness to go. They rebelled. In this particular telling of the story there were no excuses given, unlike the excuses in Luke about being too busy. The people simply wouldn’t go.

In fact, our scripture tells us that some even killed his messengers, which ensued retaliation by the king. Now, here is the caveat. Many scholars believe that the little tidbit about murder and vengeance was added much later and really is about the early church rather than the actual parable itself. After all, many Jewish prophets and Christian missionaries were killed as messengers of God's invitation.

Now, in hopes to have anyone enjoy this feast that was prepared, the king then sent a third group of people to invite anyone, and this points us straight to the Great Commission. Jesus told his disciples, right before ascending to heaven, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations…" The invitation to the table truly became extended to all. Matthew even acknowledged that those sitting at the feast with the King were good and bad. That statement may be the most important of all! It was not all about importance. For those people made themselves appear too busy for the table. It was not all about perceived actions. For those people were not excluded from the table. All, those considered good and bad, were invited to the table.

As we think about this feast table provided by God's kingdom, we are pointed back to Psalm 23. Throughout the whole Psalm, the writer and reader are pointed to the reminder that God is the caretaker. Psalm 23 overall shares a commitment to trust that God would take care of all.

In the psalm, we hear the words, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." God is not only willing to protect us, and feed us, but also there is this sense of pride in providing our needs (even in front of our enemies), and helping us heal emotionally, physically, psychologically through anointing us.

But, even if we look past the idea of the table itself in the Psalm, we can note that the psalmist believed that there would never be a lack of anything. There would never be a want. It is even noted that the psalmist listed what they did

not lack throughout the rest of the psalm, even thinking back to the lack of nothing during the 40 years in the wilderness for the Israelites. For as we sit at the table of God during our journeys, we should be able to recognize that through God's love and grace, we belong.

We can acknowledge as we sit here that God has invited us to the table. We are reminded each time we take communion together, which John Wesley, our founder, encouraged to be done every time people met together, that we belong at God's table. But as much as we are reminded, deep down do we feel like we belong at the table? Do we feel compelled enough to invite others to the table and belong?

When we have places open at our tables, both literally and spiritually, we are allowing unexpected connections to occur, for the Holy Spirit to work in many ways. And frankly, it takes risks to open up a spot at our table. It takes personal risks to feel compelled to ask someone, to open up ourselves even slightly to another person at our table, who may be different from us. The vulnerability is real, even before we open our mouths in full conversation and connection.

And sometimes, friends, it even takes social risks. We can risk losing our standing in our community or people we associate with for shared purpose with someone who historically society has looked down upon like those diverse in race, or diverse neurologically, diverse in socioeconomic status, or an LGBTQ+ person, or an immigrant, and sadly the list goes on. Those who sit at God's table now were once considered risky too. And let us remember that every interaction, every relationship we have had risks. But, God shares beauty in risks. God changes lives and this world through the risks we are invited into through the Holy Spirit.

Who can we have shared purpose with? The answer should be everyone. Who do we need to take a risk on in order to invite them to the table of belonging?

In 2013, something called the Turquoise Table began. Now, listen to this amazing example of hospitality and shared purpose. A Texas mother painted her picnic table turquoise and put it in her front yard. First she invited friends, neighbors, and family to the table to “do life together.” Over time she has invited anyone passing along to join her as well. For Kristin Schell it is about becoming a symbol of hospitality where someone can safely sit and connect with someone over coffee, tea, water, food, whatever. She considers it a nourishment not only for the body, but for the soul.

So, today, I want to challenge us to think and act on this Danish Proverb: “If there is room in the heart, there is room in the house.” Or in our case the table.

May we take risks to help others feel a sense of belonging at the table. Amen.