

Pentecost 8, August 3, 2014

The Table Is Set! We're Invited. Who's Inviting?

Isaiah 55:1–5



“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to me;

hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴ Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵ Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Dear friends in Christ.

I'm sure you would like this scene: The table is set. You're ready to sit down and eat and drink. Imagine your favorite meal. What would it be?

For me, the table would have a beautiful beef roast, crispy on the outside and juicy and tender inside. The smell from the slow cooker would have filled the house. Mashed potatoes—creamy and with a small hole pressed down in the center for a big serving of gravy. The gravy would fill that hole and then roll off the sides onto the plate, adding to the flavor of the roast beef. Fresh sweet corn, picked from the field that morning, and some roasted green onions. Fresh baked cornmeal bread, or tortillas, soft and warm, to go with each bite of potatoes and gravy. A glass of cold fresh fruit juice sits next to the plate for refreshment. And dessert? Well, cheesecake, creamy and chilled or still cooling from the oven. Bet your mouth is watering as we speak! But what is your favorite meal? What's on your plate? in your glass?

I. **Jesus sets the table as the Suffering Servant (the context of Isaiah 53).**

Isaiah writes: “Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (vv 2b–3a).

Isaiah is not talking about roast beef and cornmeal bread. The table he is inviting us to has the richest of food and the most nourishing of drink. You see, the table we eat at has been set by God's one-and-only Son. Jesus has prepared a meal for us beyond imagination.

And how did he prepare that meal? Well, just before this invitation to come and eat at this table, Isaiah had prophesied what God's Servant would do. Listen to these sentences from Isaiah 53. “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like

sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:3–6.)

Sound familiar? Of course. Jesus’ final few days on this earth. He is rejected and beaten. He is whipped and bloodied. You can picture how the Roman soldiers have despised him. You’ve seen pictures of his wounds and that he was so crushed he could not even carry his cross to his execution. Stricken. Smitten. Afflicted.

II. The table is set with the richest of fare, especially peace (vv 1b, 2b: milk, wine, good and rich food).

Jesus does all this to set the table with the richest of foods. He bore our griefs. He carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He has all our sin and iniquity on his shoulders. And by his stripes we are healed. On that cross, he prepares forgiveness for that iniquity. By his suffering, the table is covered with salvation. His death puts eternal life on our plates. Look at the table—each dish, every glass brings us to the very presence of God to eat and drink of his peace. Yes, his peace. One of the choicest of foods on Jesus’ table is peace.

And not just any peace. The Bible’s peace is more than absence of war, a stop in fighting. God’s peace is safety, health, wholeness, plenty. Food to eat. Wounds healed. Relationships strong. Bodies sound and fit. Purpose in life.

One symbol for peace is the horn of plenty. The horn of plenty is a long basket, small at one end, and at the larger open end, all sorts of food rolls out. In times of peace, people have food—lots of it. It’s a time of satisfaction.

Another sign of peace is the shaking of hands and saying, “God’s peace be with you” in a worship service. It’s a way of giving a blessing to someone else. The words and hands joined are a prayer for strong relationships in church, in home, in our neighborhoods.

Peace is health and wholeness of body and soul. Peace is freedom from worry. Peace is uninterrupted sleep. Peace is the bounce in your step and the quiet confidence of a day lived with purpose.

What an incredible spread of food on this table: forgiveness, salvation, eternal life, God’s love, and peace. It’s a meal that satisfies, blesses our relationships, gives wholeness of body and soul, provides purpose to life. And we are invited to this rich feast of blessings.

We’re invited because Jesus didn’t stay crushed and beaten. He didn’t stay in the grave. He rose victoriously on Easter. This meal is a victory celebration, a time to rejoice. It’s the most joyous meal you could ever eat because Jesus is there, alive and inviting us to join him.

III. Unlike the way of the world, which typically invites the rich and powerful, Jesus invites everyone (v 1a).

Yes, he’s inviting us. Now that, too, is incredible. Normally, who gets invited to the best meals in town? Have you ever ate at any state dinner? Or any other special celebration? There are protocols, even a protocol officer. His job is to make sure people sit in the right places around the table.

And it’s not just with state or special dinners. If you’ve got the money to be served the fanciest meals, you eat them. A big bank account and you can buy \$500 bottles of wine to drink. Are you famous? Then you get invited to the clubs and parties.

Celebrities get in; others wait in line outside. Are you good-looking and wear just the right brand-name clothes? Someone will pull up a chair for you to sit on.

But notice what happens with those meals. Those who can't afford are excluded! No money, political power, or social status? Go home. Not young and beautiful? Not welcome! Don't have a big Twitter following? Don't expect anyone to make room for you.

But that's not the case with Jesus. Listen again: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (v 1).

What an amazing invitation! Everyone is invited. No one is excluded from this invitation. You could be old, weak, tired, handicapped, nerdy, out of shape, wearing secondhand clothes bought at a thrift shop, unemployed, underemployed, unnoticed. Anyone is invited. Status, power, money, fame, looks, dress don't count at Jesus' table. In fact, you can't buy your way to this table. You can only be invited by Jesus. He set the table. The chairs are ready for you and me to sit in. And only the richest of foods are there for us to nourish bodies and souls.

IV. Because of empty chairs at the table, we need to invite others to the meal (vv 4–5: David as witness, we as the ones who call today).

But chairs are empty. Some haven't arrived at the meal yet. They still need to be invited. And who does the inviting? We do. We are the witnesses to the people who aren't yet at the table. I mean, if one hundred extra people suddenly showed up for church, we'd make room for them. But they'd need to be invited for that to happen.

Here are three practical ways for you to help with that invitation.

First, just because you can't buy a way to Jesus' table doesn't mean money isn't important in the church. Lights need to be on. Heat needs to warm the building. Bread and wine need to be bought for the Lord's Supper. Salaries need to be paid. The buildings need to be kept up so that people feel welcome and safe here. Our church needs to be an inviting place to come, and your contributions make that happen. When you put an envelope or money in the collection plate, it's not to buy your way in, but to help invite others to come and eat at Jesus' wonderful table. Give generously as those inviting others to the table.

Second, actually invite someone to come to worship. Ask someone you know to accompany you to a service or Bible class. Show that person around. Sit with him and help him follow the service. Most people who don't attend church end up coming because someone invited them. Be the one who speaks an invitation.

Third, live an inviting life. Live a life that shows anyone is welcome to feast on Jesus' forgiveness, life, salvation, and peace.

Facebook can be a way for people to use the computer to invite people to see Jesus. There is the story of a dedicated member of a Lutheran church somewhere. She had lost her son when he was a teenager. Nineteen years later, she wrote of her fond memories of him, but then went on to encourage her Facebook friends to remember that children are a gift from God, that they are never too old to hold, hug, and kiss, and that we ought always to teach them about the love of Jesus. Many people commented on this post, remembering her son with her and writing words of encouragement and support. Within a couple of days, sixty-three people had "Liked" her post. Facebook then connects these Likes and comments with many, many other

people, all who have an opportunity to read about God's gifts and Jesus' love. Who knows how many people were invited to Jesus' table just because a mom's heartfelt post spoke of a life richly blessed by her Savior, even in the midst of her grief. Those who did saw a life that invited them to feast at Jesus' table of blessings (Is 55:1).

Give generously. Invite freely. Be a living invitation. Because look what happens when we come to Jesus' table. On the altar is his body given on a cross, his blood shed for us. Picture yourself coming up to the Communion rail. You kneel. Then imagine the walls of the church aren't there, nor the stained glass windows. Instead, the communion rail extends around the world, filled with all those who eat and drink of Jesus' forgiveness and peace. We are kneeling with everyone who has come to this wonderful meal: male and female, rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old, Asian and Latino, disfigured and beautiful, handicapped and star athlete, presidents and everyday citizens, well dressed and homeless. And who else is with us? Jesus is. Our risen Lord has set the table. He invited us. What a meal this is now and for all eternity, including for those who still need to be invited.

Jesus has set and invited us to a wonderful table of food and drink so that we might invite others.

In his name, amen.