

A Rehearsal Dinner

Isaiah 11:1-2, 6-9 Revelation 19:5-9

“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb.”

This past summer we went to two family weddings. One on my side and one on Marsha’s side of the family. The one on my side was held at Sylvan Lake Lodge in South Dakota, because that is the area where my niece and her fiancé were serving in Teach for America when they met each other. So the whole clan gathered out in the wilderness.

As usual there was a rehearsal dinner. Only this one included buffalo, elk and pheasant on toast points as part of the hors d’oeuvres. And, as usual there were stories told and toasts made. Fond memories of these two growing up were shared. There were pictures on the tables: first day at school, winning a merit badge, attending the prom. We danced including some square dancing. There were lots of laughs and a few tears. It was a wonderful evening.

But no matter how wonderful the rehearsal dinner is, everyone knows it is just the warm up, the preamble, the preparation. All through the evening the excitement is spreading for the big event the next day. The dinner may tell stories of the past, but it is looking forward to tomorrow – to the day of the wedding.

We come this morning to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, to Holy Communion. As you know, this sacred moment is based on the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples before his death. It took place in a borrowed room in a friend’s house in Jerusalem. Jesus shared a holiday meal, the Passover, with his closest followers and with the man who would betray him.

Now sometimes this sacrament gets turned into a kind of memorial service. It becomes a moment to remember Jesus in the past. To think about the good old days when Jesus walked the roads of Galilee, when he healed the lepers and fed the 5,000. It becomes a time to sing old, familiar hymns and to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. What is it that Hamlet says in the graveyard, “Ah Yorick,

I know him well.” For some the communion service is only about the past, and about keeping our memories alive a little longer.

I was talking with a fellow one day who is a Presbyterian theologian and writer. He grew up in the backwoods of Tennessee, in a small Pentecostal church. He then went to college and there fell among Presbyterians, and then on to Princeton seminary. He said “You know, I am always amazed at the way Presbyterians want to tell you about who they used to be. They want to tell you about how their forebears signed the Declaration of Independence, or founded the first church in an area, or started the Log College which became Princeton University. They want to tell you who they used to be.” Ever since he said that, I have been very aware of how often at Presbytery gatherings we review our family history, and tell stories about the earlier generations. It sounds like all the good things are behind us.

Sometime we slip into making the sacrament of Holy Communion a memorial service to Jesus. We share a fond memory of a dearly beloved person who is a part of our past.

But there is another way to understand this meal. We can see it more like a rehearsal dinner before a wedding. Sure we tell stories of the past, and show pictures from our growing up together. The music may even have some nostalgia to it. But the excitement of the evening, and the reason for the evening, is found in the future. It looks forward to the big day that is coming.

We come to this table to celebrate not the history of Jesus, but the future of Jesus. “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.” We look forward from this table to the time when the New Jerusalem shall arrive like a bride adorned for her husband. The day when death shall be no more, neither crying nor pain. We sing today about the day when all the angels and saints shall sing in four part harmony “The Hallelujah Chorus”. One day there shall be a glorious family gathering, and there will be room at the table for all of us. There may be some baby pictures on the table; there may be some prom night photos. But the celebration will be about the future and not about the past.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus says "I will not eat this bread or drink this cup again until I do so in the kingdom."

That is where we are headed.

This looking forward in hope is not a new thing. All the way back in Isaiah chapter 11, 700 BC, we find a vision of the kingdom that is coming and the dining table set up by God. (Christians sometimes talk of heaven as a place of pearly gates with streets of gold. But the Jews pictured it as a banquet, a feast.)

Isaiah describes a banquet with an unusual guest list. The big, bad wolf will sit next to the sheep, and say "pass the salad please." The leopard will put her arm around the old goat and tell a joke. The calves and lions, the cows and bears will all square dance together after the meal is over. And a littler child shall be the caller. "Bow to your partner. And bow to your predator. Do si do and promenade around the hall. "

Isaiah knew all about a world that was full of enemies. The tiny nation of Judah was surrounded by the great powers of Egypt and Babylon, whose armies marched back and forth across Palestine. The upper crust of Jerusalem saw its prestige and wealth slowly eroding, and their greed increased. They would do anything to get ahead of the other guy. Isaiah saw leaders become blind to the injustice that robbed the working poor of fair wages, leaving them unable to feed or shelter their families. Things kept falling apart as each one looked out only for himself or herself. The nation of Judah eroded from the inside out.

Isaiah speaks a great deal about the justice of God that makes all people family. He looks forward to the day when the Messiah will come and judge the poor with equity, and the meek with righteousness. A Messiah will come with the Spirit of the Lord upon him to build up the beloved community. There is a day coming when "they shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. A day when the earth shall be as full of the knowledge of God as the ocean is full of water."

With Isaiah and all the disciples of Jesus we look forward in hope the future that God is bringing. Our anthem this morning comes from South Africa. It is

dedicated to Mandela and de Klerk. It combines two different kinds of music as it looks forward to the day when all people shall live together as God's children. We are many colors, but one family.

Because we look forward in hope, we rehearse for the kingdom that is coming. We rehearse by being people of forgiveness, who let go of grudges in order to share the bread and the cup. We rehearse by being those who share now with the poor, and who work now for justice in our community. We strive to be peacemakers in a world that knows too much war.

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. Blessed are those who look forward to all that God is going to do in, through, and in spite of us.

Dr. Charlie Summers

Reflection question: Where this week do you want to rehearse for the kingdom of God which is coming? What part of the future of Jesus do you want to embrace now?