

“A Divine Dinner Date”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 28, 2022

Psalm 112
Hebrews 13:2
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Hello, Jews and Gentiles, I am guessing you are hungry for your daily dish from you-know-who: Galilee’s Gossip Gabber! I’m going to take a break from telling tantalizing tales about who met who at the nearby well– you *know* how these watering holes often end up in marriage proposals. And since no one has announced any visions from angels in the past week or so, you are stuck with none other than *yours truly* as your messenger of glad tidings.

Today I want to pick up on that question Nathaniel asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” As it seems, quite a few people have been wondering the same question and so have been following Jesus of Nazareth to find out. I have it on authority– someone who knows someone who knows Luke who wrote down what Mark and some other mysterious person said– that this Bethlehem boy was at his third notable dinner party this month! He’s been invited by friends, enemies, and frenemies. What can they possibly want from him? A direct line to God Almighty? A chance to make him stumble so they can laugh at him? Or, something more sinister– I have heard that some want to see him imprisoned or worse!

This last particular dinner invitation came on the Sabbath. You know how it is for our Jewish friends: no farming, no chariot races, no cooking... pretty ironic that the Shabbat meal is central to the celebration of Sabbath, but no cooking is allowed on that day. Even though the Shabbat foods are leftovers that have to be prepared ahead of time, they are beloved foods and they stir a yearning in the belly. My grandmother used to say that *Shabbat* is the spice that makes the food so delicious. As a woman, I wonder if there is something that comes from the *peace* of when all the women of the household finally get to rest– from gathering water, seasoning meat, plucking fruits and vegetables from the garden, and so much chopping... that makes the food truly delicious, even if it *is* cold. Sabbath is the one day my friend Martha seems at ease with herself and those around her. In fact, both Mary AND her sister Martha were there at that dinner, with neither expected to be in the kitchen. Like I said, it was on the Sabbath, and there were some who were watching Jesus’ every move, to see if he would break *halakhah*– you see, there is a way of life we follow, which is the sum of all the Torah teaches us. If you break that, well then, the whole thing can pretty much fall apart, can’t it?

You know, there’s been talk. I didn’t see it myself, but I heard from Miriam who said that Joshua told her that James reported that Jesus and his disciples were walking through the fields on the Sabbath one day, and they were hungry, so they just started plucking grains, straight from the fields, and eating them. Some onlookers were getting their loincloths in a wad over that– it was a clear violation of Sabbath protocol. But Jesus supposedly reminded them of some old words,

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” and he asked them to consider what that truly means. If that’s what he was really saying, he was trolling them with the Talmudic tradition, quoting our prophet Hosea right there. I think he kind of stumped people– they didn’t really know *what* to say or do after that. But it certainly drew some attention, and I can’t say it was all the good kind. Some were tutting their tongues and others were furrowing their brows. And others seemed genuinely curious, wanting to learn. More and more people were watching to see what Jesus would do next.

Turns out, Jesus did not disappoint those looking for a stir. For those who stuck around to watch– and there were many, like I said– they got to witness Jesus curing a man with a withered hand, and healing a woman whose back had been twisted for 18 years, causing her to walk with her face to the ground. Can you imagine, half a lifetime like that, with only the dirt of the floor to greet you, and then to finally stand up, face to face with the man who cured you, Jesus himself? And all this was on the Sabbath. Now it’s one thing to pluck a few grains from a field on the Sabbath. But these unexplainable healings? These demonstrated that this man Jesus has some power. And when someone new has power, those who have been enjoying power for themselves are always concerned; they want to know if this is going to upset their placement in the order of things.

I can see all that, since I’ve been observing these characters my entire public life. But you know what I can also see? I can see *Abigail*– that’s the name of the woman who had been hunched over for half her life– I can see Abigail’s smile. I can see her now able to scoop up her grandchildren, and hold them in her arms. And it occurs to me that maybe God gave us the Sabbath so that we can enjoy relationship, and bring people closer together, rather than giving it as an arbitrary rule to please God and to mark off how *different* we are from everyone else. I’m starting to see Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath as actually a *fulfillment* of Sabbath, rather than a breach of it.

But I digress. Back to the dinner party. It was hosted by a Pharisee, so you know they were going to bubble wrap that Sabbath so that no rules would be broken in THAT particular home. I don’t mean to stereotype Pharisees. Yours truly would *never* be one to stereotype anyone. And in fact, Jesus has some Pharisees as some of his closest friends, like Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea– I guess it’s even possible that Jesus could be a Pharisee himself. Sometimes it’s the people from your own family who can be the most critical of each. little. step.

I’m not sure who made the seating chart for *this* dinner party; I’m not sure if it was even official. But clearly some people had in mind who should get the best seats– perhaps they were by the window, where you could get the cooler, evening breeze, the seats that were next to the host, and next to Jesus– who apparently everyone was eager to hear from.

Can you imagine it? People spilling their wine as they dash to claim the seats to Jesus’ right and to his left. I wonder if the host had planned that the most pious should sit next to Jesus, whether to honor him or to trap him, I am not sure. What I do know is that Martha got squeezed out so that she couldn’t even fit at the table– yeah, yeah, it was *that* Martha, who had already

missed out on hearing from Jesus at that other dinner party where she was so busy cooking and providing other hospitality that she missed most of what he had to say, unlike her sister Mary who simply put those tasks aside to listen.

Jesus wasn't having any of that. No, no, it's not like he stood up and flipped the tables over— I can't imagine him doing *that*. But he metaphorically turned the tables. He came up with a little story for the party, saying, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;

and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you,

'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

You should have seen the look on *this* host's face. I mean, I didn't see it, since I wasn't at the party, but I have fun imagining it. And from what I hear, all of the sudden it was like musical chairs, with everyone hopping up and offering someone else their seat. I laugh to imagine it.

But the night was still young. All those empty seats, abandoned by the people who wanted to prove how honorable they were by humbling themselves? Well, while they were huddled in the dark corner of the room, Jesus called out the open window. Bartimaeus! Hannah! Eleazar! Titus! Come and eat! There is plenty of food! Pretty soon we saw a woman in rags leading a blind man into the room, and her little boy followed. Another man came in, limping— and he clearly wasn't even a Jew. These are people any one of us probably passed by a million times but never learned their names— but Jesus already knew them.

As he served them their plates, the rest of the dinner party watched in silent shock. And then, one by one, Jesus served each of the people at the party— until the host said, "No, allow me." And just as Jesus did, the host served the rest of the guests, and then heaped second helpings onto the unexpected guests' plates, saying their names as Jesus had. Even though there were too many people to fit at the table, somehow, the people shifted, so everyone had a place, and everyone could be seen. The silence lifted, and people started cracking jokes, and getting to know the new folks who had joined.

You know, I did not even get an invitation to this dinner party. And at first, I felt really snubbed by that. But then I got to thinking, I got to feeling, that the invitation was actually there for me, too, even if it didn't come in a formal summons. And I have been thinking of that image of a table where everyone has a place, a welcome— regardless of their gender, or their accent, or their status. I would like to sit at a table like that. Yeah, even me, your village gossip. Just

think— how many more salacious stories I might have for you if I broadened the kinds of people I notice, if I expanded my dinner table.

I am a gossip. I trade stories for power. I know how a story can shape a narrative, build an understanding, change an entire community. As a teller of stories, I am intrigued by this Jesus, whom some say is the Messiah. He's a storyteller, too. Like me, he knows how to make people lean in, and listen. And I find myself listening, even more. People's stories aren't just a commodity that I can trade— gossip for social power. No. Their stories just might be a pathway to something holy— if I can listen without inserting my own judgment. Their lives, in and of themselves, just might be something holy.

I know I said that it had been a slow week— that no angels have appeared in the past days in holy visions, no messengers of glad tidings. But that's not exactly true. I can't stop thinking about the unexpected guests Jesus invited to a party he didn't even host. In a way, those *were* the angels— if you think about an angel being a messenger of God's truth. I'm starting to wonder if we are meeting angels all the time, without even knowing it.

Makes me think— maybe it will change up my writing a bit. Who knows? I could be writing about an angel without even knowing it. Hey— I am fortunate enough to know how to read and write. And I love a good story. Perhaps I will just start keeping track of these stories Jesus tells, and collect them as I hear them, as well as collect the stories of how people respond TO Jesus' stories. Who knows, maybe it will be useful today, or even for future generations. Who knows, if Jesus is the Messiah people say he is, maybe these stories will really matter.

Well, stay tuned to my next column: Galilee's Gossip Gabber Goes Gospel!