**The Least, the Lost and the Lonely**

**Text: Luke 14:21-23**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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As some of you know, I’ve been sick. I had a bad cold or the flu or something that kept me in bed for the better part of 3 days. But as miserable as my body felt, there was something even worse going on. Driving home from the Board Meeting on Tuesday night I was so tired that I had to listen to an oldies station to stay awake. I was almost home when a particularly odious example of early 70’s popular music came on the radio. And the song got stuck in my head! So imagine spending 3 days not only sick in bed, but with an endless loop of the Partridge Family going through your head!!

But as bad as *that* was, it could’ve been much worse.

I might’ve been all alone, without Helen to take care of me.

I might’ve been without enough bedding or clothing to stay warm, like the families who might be such need without the coats that they receive at our Coat Bank.

I might’ve been without a home at all, like the men that I’ve worked with on the streets of Bloomington, sick with a cold or the flu or worse – with no bed, no warm blankets, no shelter, no way to escape their misery – on a cold winter’s day.

I’m talking about the folks who are sometimes called the least, the lost and the lonely, those for whom Jesus had a very warm heart.

We see this in today’s scripture lesson: Jesus’ Parable of the Great Dinner. Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who decided to host a big dinner party. He invited a bunch of important people: rich land owners, powerful Roman bureaucrats, influential scribes, maybe even a few Pharisees. He invited them all *but*, they all had excuses for why they couldn’t make it. One had a new piece of property to check out, so he sent his regrets. Another had some new field animals to test, so he sent his regrets. A third had just gotten married, and as he planned to spend the evening with his new bride, he didn’t even *pretend* to send his regrets. Well, the host of the party gets really ticked-off and he says to his slave, “Go into the streets and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” The slave, anticipating his master’s wishes, has already done so. And there’s *still* room at the table. So the master says, “I don’t care if you have to drag them in kicking and screaming; I want those places filled!”

In order to fully appreciate Jesus’ point in telling this story – or, more accurately, Luke’s point in re-telling this story of Jesus – you have to know that Luke is writing in a sophisticated and complex form of Greek. Of the four gospels – all of them written in Greek – Luke uses the most sophisticated language. This tells us that the folks for whom he’s writing are most likely educated, well-off financially, and maybe moving in the very circles as the wealthy man and the well-connected friends that he’s invited to his dinner party. And, these folks are Christians. Luke is writing his gospel for folks who’ve already made the Good Confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior; he’s writing his gospel so that these well-to-do Christians can obtain a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what he requires of them. This contradicts the left-wing idea that gained popularity a few decades ago that the first Christians were a bunch of poor people whose primary concern was to off the rich and the powerful. It just isn’t so! Some of the first Christians had some degree of wealth and power. At the very least, they included merchants and business people. But who is it that these relatively well-off folks are being told to invite into their church? “The poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” In other words, the vulnerable, the homeless, the people who have no one to advocate for them, or look out for them, or provide for them.

And at least some of those well-to-do early Christians paid attention. In Acts and in Paul’s letters, we see early Christian communities meeting in people’s homes – you had to have some means in order to own property, so you know there are some people with money in these early churches – the first churches met in people’s homes, but they included people who were poor and hungry and depended on the generosity of their better-off Christian brothers and sisters.

Those early Christian congregations – some of them, anyway – had opened their doors to the least, the lost and the lonely. And maybe they did so first on a charity basis. I’m just speculating here, we don’t really know for sure. But maybe initially they saw people who were poor and hungry and they just said, “These folks need food and shelter. Maybe they’ll become believers eventually, maybe not. At the moment it doesn’t matter because right now what they need is a good meal.” So they went into the streets and offered food and other very basic physical comforts to the sick and the poor and those in distress. Maybe in the 1st century, certainly in subsequent centuries. For example, people who survived the great plagues of Europe during the Middle Ages did so in part because Christians offered them care when their families and friends had abandoned them. They heard the Master’s directive to go into the streets and bring in the least, the lost and the lonely.

I’ve seen many social-service type outreach programs fail because the congregation’s real goal was to bring new members into the church. Their first priority wasn’t the care of their neighbors per se but simply to get some more warm bodies into the pews. So they used food and clothing and other charity programs as the bait. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to bring new people into the church; we are, after all, called to be evangelists. But if that’s your *primary* goal, then what you should do is to go and tell your friends and neighbors and co-workers about Jesus. Share your faith, talk about how God’s love has made a difference in your life, and invite folks to church and be honest about it. That’s the best way to grow the church. If you’re going to provide food and shelter for the needy, then you do that because such outreach and compassion is *itself* part of what Jesus calls the church to do; providing such compassion is *itself* a worthy goal and a worthwhile ministry.

So the first thing that jumps out at me from this parable is the Master’s order to “Go and feed; go and provide at least a minimum amount of comfort and compassion to the least, the lost and the lonely.”

But the second thing that I hear the parable saying is, “Go and invite.” The slave is doing much more than going out with plates of food; he’s inviting people into a place of comfort and warmth; a place of abundance where there’s plenty to offer. We know there’s plenty because already a lot of folks have come in and the slave says, “There is *still* room.” In my imagination I see a big table just overflowing with food: meat and fruit and bread piled higher and higher on a board that is just *groaning* under that delicious load. And while the room is filling-up nicely, others can still find a place at the table.

That’s what it’s like in God’s Kingdom. Because, of course, that’s what this parable is about; that’s what *all* of Jesus’ parables are about: life in God’s Kingdom. There is room to spare, there is food to spare, there is love to spare; more than enough for *everyone*! That’s because we worship a God of *abundance*. Jesus witnessed such abundance on a regular basis because he was regularly invited to dinner parties. In fact, he’s telling this parable at a dinner party. People loved to hear his stories and engage him in debate. So they invited him in, and he witnessed all of this food made available only for the well-to-do and for invited guests such as himself and he said, “Hey, we need to spread this abundance around; let’s invite in a bunch of poor folk!” He even brought some of them in with him. His whole entourage of disciples and other followers was just as poor and homeless as he was, and when Jesus was invited to a meal, he often just brought them along. Jesus’ attitude seems to have been, “Hey, God has provided more than enough for everyone, so let’s not be shy about swinging those doors open wide and inviting people in.”

I’m hearing Jesus say, “Go and feed;” I’m hearing Jesus say, “Go and invite,” and I’m hearing Jesus say, “Go and tell.” Go and tell people not only where they can find food for their bodies, but also food for their souls. Go and tell the least, the lost and the lonely that they are hardly least in Jesus’ eyes, and they need not be lost and lonely any longer either. Because, in the final analysis, the early church was offering not just charity, but *relationship.* They didn’t want to *just* give away food or blankets or coats; they also and especially wanted to share the love of the Lord. The attitude was not, “I want to give you this food or this clothing so that I can feel good about myself for doing so;” no, the attitude was, “I want to give you this food or this clothing because I see in you the face of Jesus, and as I love being in relationship with my Lord, so I want to be in relationship with you. You’re more than welcome to come to church with me next Sunday.”

Years ago, when I was growing-up in Chicago, my church took on a mission project one Christmas: they delivered hampers of food and presents to poor families in the community. As my dad carried one of those hampers up the steps of a South Side tenement, he was greeted at the top of the stairs by a very grateful family; so grateful that they invited him in for a cup of coffee. Dad hadn’t counted on that. He’d left just enough time to deliver the hamper and then he had to get to work. He was there on a charity mission, and they were seeking a relationship. And it broke his heart to have to tell them no. It’s like the words from a great social gospel hymn: “Yet long these multitudes to see the sweet compassion of thy face.” The family had *received* the church’s compassion, but they also wanted to *see* it in a human face. They longed for relationship.

Relationship is finally what it’s about: relationship with God and relationship with those whom God loves: whether it’s a young family joining the church or the homeless guy sleeping across the alley. God calls us to extend compassion to all God’s children, and to invite them all into the warm, loving relationships of the Church. And all means all; *especially* the least, the lost and the lonely. Amen.