

Dear friends,

A parable this week which is told in the context of a banquet. News headlines today are often about celebrities who are significant simply because they are wealthy. Jesus' parable challenges the rules which keep people divided from one another and suggests that, in serving each another, barriers are broken, and the reign of God can break in. I hope that you are all doing as well as you hoped and that the summer has been kind to you. As always, I keep you in my thoughts and my prayers and I wish you every blessing. Margaret

Call to worship:

'Jesus is Lord!' May we have confidence in this truth today and find out how to share it with others. Lord, we are here to worship you – the one who cares for us more deeply than we can understand. Give us the confidence to care deeply for others, as you care for us. Amen.

Creating God, you provide for the poor and the hungry a banquet of justice and righteousness.
Providing God, you provide for the outcast and the stranger a banquet of promise and welcome.
Generous God, you provide for the forgotten and injured a banquet of inclusion and healing.
We praise you for your grace and goodness that changes hope from optimism into promise – justice from pledge into practice – community from friendship into belonging.
Loving God, may we be as generous as your invitation is to us. Amen.

The words to 'Such love' written by Graham Kendrick. Copyright 1988 Make way Music.

Songs of Fellowship 514

1 Such love, pure as the whitest snow;
Such love, weeps for the shame I know;
Such love, paying the debt I owe - O Jesus, such love.

2 Such love, stilling my restlessness;
Such love, filling my emptiness.
Such love, showing me holiness - O Jesus, such love.

3 Such love, springs from eternity;
Such love, streaming through history;
Such love, fountain of life to me - O Jesus, such love.

As the suggestion of hymn did not make clear which 'Such love' was intended, I enclose from Songs of Fellowship 515 this one by Dave Bryant Copyright 1982 Thankyou Music.

Such love! Such grace!
Makes the pieces come falling into place.
Breaks through the darkness, turns on the light,
Making blindness give way to sight.
Your love has conquered, has set us free
To become all You've called us to be.
Healing the wounded, making us stand,
Bringing peace and a sword in our hand.
And no power in the universe can separate us from the love of God.
We're yours for ever with nothing to fear,
Willing slaves to the love that brought us here.

Prayer including the Lord's Prayer:

Living God, you are our helper, and we will not fear.

We will not look away from those in need, nor turn our backs on those who cry out for help.

We will not be deaf to the cries of the suffering, because you are our God and you give us courage.

You lead by example and empower us with your compassion – and so we will serve and follow you.

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for your kingship is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

Your compassion and your humility are the same through all time, as is your boldness.

Your love is the same – and your servant heart inspires, strengthens and sustains us always. Amen.

Compassionate God, sometimes we make our world too small and look inwards, not outwards.

Forgive us when we lack confidence to care and courage to act.

Sometimes our hearts are too small, and we miss an opportunity to make a difference – forgive us.

Sometimes our lives are too full and we are oblivious to those who feel empty – forgive us.

Sometimes we don't look after ourselves enough and cause others to fret and worry – forgive us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Gracious God, you are our helper, and you restore our peace when we make a mistake.

You lift us up when we fall and when we turn back to you forgive us with humility, patience and compassion as Jesus promised you would. Thank you, gracious God. Amen.

God of all, your generous heart draws us in to be cared for, supported and inspired.

We praise you that you call us to care for, support and inspire others.

Thank you for the confidence to be bold, to take risks and to trust that you will bless us with the gifts we need.

Thank you for your beautiful, inclusive and strong love, which is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 14: 1-14: ERV copyright 1987,1999, 2006 World Bible Translation Center

On a sabbath day, Jesus went to the home of a leading Pharisee to eat with him. The people there were all watching him very closely. A man with a bad disease was there in front of him. Jesus said to the pharisees and experts in the law: "Is it right or wrong to heal on the Sabbath day?" But they would not answer his question. So he took the man and healed him. Then he sent the man away. Jesus said to the Pharisees and teachers of the law: "If your son or work animal falls into a well on the sabbath day, you know you would pull him out immediately." The Pharisees and teachers of the law could say nothing against what he said.

Then Jesus noticed that some of the guests were choosing the best places to sit. So he told this story: "When someone invites you to a wedding, don't sit in the most important seat. They may have invited someone more important than you. And if you are sitting in the most important seat, they will come to

you and say, 'give this man your seat!' Then you will have to move down to the last place and be embarrassed.

So when someone invites you, go sit in the seat that is not important. Then they will come to you and say: 'Friend, move up here to this better place!' What an honour this will be for you in front of all the other guests. Everyone who makes themselves important will be made humble. But everyone who makes themselves humble will be made important."

Then Jesus said to the Pharisee who had invited him: "When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite only your friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours. At another time they will pay you back by inviting you to eat with them. Instead, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled and the blind. Then you will have great blessings, because these people cannot pay you back. They have nothing. But God will reward you at the time when all godly people rise from death."

Comment: Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and faces increasing hostility as he travels south. We do not learn why the Pharisee invited him to a meal, but the closing verses suggest that part of the reason for the hospitality was a wish to impress and gain influence with the neighbours. This was normal at that time when a man's honour depended on his reputation amongst his peers [a well-behaved wife was also essential!!].

Although he is not the host, Jesus takes the lead in the conversation and undercuts this tradition in two directions. The guests are competitive in the ritualised game of choosing seats. Jesus was not the only to point out that this was a risky choice – being asked to move 'below the salt' [ie 'lower down the table'] brought serious shame. Next Jesus addresses the host directly and asks him to consider his motivation. The unremitting focus on honour means that Jesus' suggested guest-list is radical, even offensive. After all, there is no social capital by inviting people who are poor or disabled – what return can they make?

Jesus countered this by telling another story – perhaps you might like to go on to read this - Luke 14: 15-23.

As kingdom people, we can take risks in caring for others without needing to worry about our status, for we can have confidence in God through Jesus.

Illustration – from Sermon Illustrations [Complete Common Worship] by David Adam. Copyright 2005, 2006, 2007, 2011 David Adam.

'Sadhu Sundar Singh was the first Christian Sadhu. He suffered great persecution in his missionary travels in Tibet. Often the sadhu declared that he was rescued by angels. The following tells of such an occasion.

The sadhu was arrested for entering Tibet and preaching Christianity. The Lama condemned him to death. The sadhu was thrown into a deep well. The well was covered and locked. The key was kept around the Lama's waist. The remains of others who had met such a fate were in the well though the sadhu could not see this because there was no light. For two days and two nights he was without food and water. On the third day, when he was exhausted, a wonderful thing happened. He heard the key turn in the lock, and the cover was removed. A rope was lowered. It had a loop in the end for the sadhu to put his foot in. he was then gently lifted to the surface. He helped his rescuer to put the cover back on the well. When the sadhu turned to thank him, he was gone. It was only some time later, when the sadhu resumed his preaching, that the Lama discovered what had happened. Yet the key was still fastened at his waist.

I am sure it was a caring human being who rescued the sadhu. Just as I am also sure and agree with Sadhu Sundar Singh that it was an angel of God that set him free.'

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Have you ever experienced – perhaps at school – a sports team selection process where everyone lines up, two captains are appointed, and they have to choose people one-by-one for their teams? Clearly the sporty people are selected first, then everyone else. It can be very painful for those who don't have a flair for the sport, waiting until they are eventually picked because the captains have run out of options. Being excluded – or failing to be included – is tough. School sports is an obvious example of how some people are considered more acceptable than others. But there are plenty of others – many, many more forms of social inclusion and exclusion.

So we have to think hard – whose opinion do we regard and whose do we disregard? Who is more acceptable to us? In our church, in our community – who's in the 'in-crowd' and who's on the fringe? Do we even prioritise some people over others, even in God's family?

Prayer

Loving God,

I offer to you those times when I have been put squarely in my place, and been made to feel small.....

I offer to you those times when I have tried to find my place, and been too conscious of my own self-importance.....

I offer to you those times when you have taken me in your arms and loved me.....
when you have whispered in my ear and called me yours.....

Help me when I fall short and need your support – lead me where you want me to go, so that I find myself in you and you in me. Amen.

Lord, we remember those in prison, as if we were with them: those imprisoned for their beliefs [like Sadhu Sundar Singh] – those imprisoned unjustly. We remember also those who have been imprisoned for the wrong they have done. May we never neglect to show kindness.

We remember those caught up in conflict, as if we were there with them: those fleeing persecution – those living day to day in the midst of terror – those trapped in loveless relationships. May we never neglect to show kindness.

We remember those in need, as if we were there with them: those struggling to make ends meet – those who go to bed hungry every night – those deprived of clean water to drink and with which to wash. May we never neglect to show kindness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Close:

Lord, go with us today as we think about including all people.

Inspire us to pray for those in our own neighbourhood who are often excluded.

Inspire us to be active in seeking to include others and find a place for everyone in our community.

We thank you that no-one is ever beyond your love and care.

Help us to be people who live and spread that message. Amen.

