

A Sermon by Mollie Donihe '16

Mollie Donihe '16 delivered a sermon during Homecoming at the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church on Sunday, October 6th, 2019. In attendance was one of Donihe's trusted mentors, the Rev. Dr. Brian Ammons, Warren Wilson College Chaplain and Director of Spiritual Life. Donihe and Ammons were featured in this year's Mentors & Mentees story in the Owl & Spade Magazine. Below is a transcript of Donihe's Homecoming sermon.

Luke 14:15-24 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁵When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom."

¹⁶Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. ¹⁷When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' ¹⁸One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' ¹⁹Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' ²⁰Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' ²¹When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his

master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' ²²The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' ²³The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. ²⁴I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

As the words of the scripture text this morning ring through your mind, I'd ask each of you, if it feels right to you, to close your eyes. As you quiet your thoughts and settle into your seat, summon up in your mind an image of the most wonderful banquet you can imagine. Maybe this banquet is based on a memory of a meal you've actually had or a party you've actually attended, or maybe it is arising completely out of your imagination. What do you see when you look around this banquet? What do you hear? What smells fill your nose? What tastes linger on your tongue? Who is there, next to you, across from you? What emotions do you feel? What *is* it that makes this banquet *so wonderful*?

When you are ready, open your eyes, and tuck that image of your banquet away in your mind so that you might return to it later. Even if you forget the details of your imagined event, perhaps you will not forget the way it made you feel, or the thing that left you in delight and wonder at the thought of it.

I wonder if Rev. Hugh Thomson Kerr had a similar vision of a magnificent banquet in

his mind and heart when he first conceived of World Communion Sunday in 1933. As many of you may know, it was a Presbyterian minister who started the celebration of this day, at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He felt compelled to do *something* that would bring different churches together in Christian unity, giving them an opportunity to experience how interconnected they really were with one another.

According to his son, this new celebration was slow to gain traction. People didn't give it a ton of thought. But, during the Second World War, he said "the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together." People were experiencing firsthand the fragmentation of the world through war, and the fear and uncertainty that accompanied it. It was against *that* backdrop that many other churches everywhere sought unity and connection. People seemed to crave the unifying force of sharing a meal, not only at their dining room tables but in the global church as well.

These folks weren't the first ones to pick up on the power of a shared meal. Our scripture today comes from the Gospel of Luke, and let me tell you, Luke loved a good food story. Through reading this particular gospel, it seems that, for Jesus, gathering around a table and sharing a meal was the perfect opportunity to teach and engage with others.

Now in the passage leading up to the one we read today, we learn that Jesus is eating dinner at the house of a prominent Pharisee. He sets the scene of his parable in a way that surely would have felt familiar to many of those gathered. A man was to host a large dinner. The invitations were sent out, the preparations were made. Perhaps a fattened calf was readied just for the occasion. In order to host such a banquet, we can safely assume that this was a well-to-do man.

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus has just finished telling his dinner companions

that when they host a banquet, they should not invite their wealthy family and friends, who will reward them by inviting them to another banquet in return. Instead, they should invite those without the means or the physical ability to return the favor. Their reward then would come not from their guests, but from God.

It seems as if, though, the host in our parable today did not heed this advice, at least not at first. The invited guests seemed to have plenty of resources, at least enough to buy land and livestock. In fact, all of the excuses they gave had to do with their own economic interest. The first invited guest bought a farm and needed to go see it. The second invited guest bought five teams of oxen and needed to go check on them. The third invited guest got married—and although we may think of this differently today, at the time, marriage was certainly an economical contract between a man and a woman's father. These guests could not come to the dinner, even though they probably RSVP'd 'yes,' because they felt as though they had to tend to their own possessions, their own interests.

Now, at this point of the story, let us resist together the urge to become self-righteous in our responses. It may be easy to see those who turn down the invitation and say, "how stupid and selfish and short-sighted they must have been!" But haven't we too, at times, resisted or turned down the invitation to be a part of something bigger than ourselves?

When his servant informed him of these excuses and revealed to him that no one was coming, the host became angry. But in his urgency, he sent his servant into the city, to extend the welcome to those living in poverty and with disabilities. He told his servant not simply to invite them, but to bring them—after all, many of these people could not physically walk into the house on their own accord. Even after he'd done this, there was still room, so the host drew the circle of welcome even wider. He sent out his servant to the highways and

back alleys, to the outskirts, to the places filled with travelers and Gentiles, those from different nations and with different religions. The host said, “Urge them to come so that my house will be filled.”

As far as this story tells us, there were no strings attached. The host required no entry fee, no documentation, no religious conversion. He simply said, and I’m paraphrasing, “Y’all come eat.”

This parable ends on somewhat of a cliffhanger—we don’t get to find out how the dinner went or what it was like. But it leaves us room to wonder. I wonder if maybe this big dinner was something like the banquets I invited each of you to imagine earlier. I wonder if maybe the guests were filled with the same sense of awe and wonder at what they experienced as we might be. I wonder if there was singing, or dancing, or laughing.

Perhaps when he told these roundabout parables, Jesus wanted us to be left to wonder. If he wanted to give us quick, easy answers, I’d imagine that he would have chosen a different pedagogy, something a little more straight-forward than his cryptic stories. But maybe through telling them, Jesus is inviting us to pull up a chair to these stories, seeking not clarity, but inspiration, and perhaps leaving the table with nothing but more questions and an eagerness to ask them.

It feels appropriate that today is World Communion Sunday *and* Homecoming Sunday, because coming home to this hallowed ground also feels to me like coming home to the place where my love for communion really took root.

As a student here, I attended gatherings of a group called Emmaus, where a quirky and bold ecumenical handful of students, led by the beloved Brian Ammons, would gather to wrestle with questions big and small of Christian faith, life, justice, and meaning. When we gathered, we shared communion with one another. At the end of our time together, we would pass around the loaf and the cup, serving and being served

by our friends, often singing together or uttering words of thanksgiving. When the elements made their way around, they were returned to the center of the circle. From there, we moved into a time of prayer, and no sooner than we had said ‘Amen,’ we moved back together in unison to the center of the circle, going in for more—a continuation of our prayer. We returned to the loaf and the cup for seconds and for thirds, often tearing off large chunks of bread or gulping from the mason jar of juice. “I need some more Jesus today,” we’d say, as we laughed, shared stories, and commiserated about our shared busy-ness as students immersed in this thing us Wilsonites call “The Triad.” We ate until we were satisfied, and were still often left echoing to each other at the end, “Are you done? There’s more!” When we were joined by newcomers, we would explain to them as we all circled around our leftovers—“we believe in abundance here.”

For us, this act of going back in for more didn’t make the practice of Communion any less sacred. On the contrary! We knew so deeply the sacredness of our practice that it became representative of a theology that undergirded us all. We believed, in our minds and in our practice, that at God’s table, there is always enough.

This is the same theology that flowed through our Campus Interfaith Dinners, when students from all different faiths and traditions gathered around a lovingly prepared meal, wrestling with questions of being and living and loving. The host of this meal, like the host of the dinner in the scripture, simply said, “Y’all come eat.”

Now as much as I’d like for this parable to be a perfectly happy representation of *all* God’s people feasting together, completely problem-free, I remember the words of my New Testament Professor, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine: “If we hear a parable and we think it’s sweet or lovely, we’re probably not hearing it well.”

As I read this parable, I am haunted by the

last words of the banquet host. “I tell you,” he says, “Not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”

When I hear these words, I hear the prophetic edge in his voice. As the parable comes to an abrupt end with this declaration, I can’t help but imagine a sort of Alfred Hitchcock-esque zoom in on the man’s face, capturing his stoic yet cautionary expression. What does he mean? Is he speaking only literally about the guests who were invited to his banquet? Or is he saying something to *us*? What are we supposed to make of these words?

Now I don’t know what it means to you, but to me, it means this: We can’t fake it.

We can’t fake our desire to be a part of what God is doing in the world. It’s not enough to RSVP ‘yes’; we’ve got to show up. I’m standing up here in front of you today saying this to myself as much as anyone: our good intentions to get involved are not enough. We are being challenged by this scripture to accept the invitation to participate in God’s abundance, in the myriad of ways we are each called to do so, to play a role in creating the kin-dom of God on this earth, here and now. We are being challenged to see ourselves as a part of a greater whole, in fellowship with all of God’s creation—with those who look like us and those who don’t; those who share our faiths and our creeds and those who carry wisdom different than ours; with species big and small, from whom we can learn great lessons; and with the parts of creation that don’t have mouths to speak but make this world beautiful and livable and resilient.

We are busy people, I know; we have prior commitments! We spend our time in the company of loved ones, because let’s face it, at times it can be just too exhausting to hang out with people who don’t already *get* us. But—we are not to be isolated behind the walls of our homes or the walls of our faith traditions or the walls of our social classes or the walls of our preconceived notions. What end do we serve if

we forget that we are already connected to the rest of creation, in one big, beautiful divine web, because God made it so?

On this World Communion Sunday, we are given the opportunity to practice and feel a global connection, as so many of us around the world feast today on this marvelous banquet. We come to the table, or the altar, or the kneeling rail; we receive the feast from those who love and shepherd us, or we serve the feast directly to our neighbors and siblings seated beside us; we stretch out our hands for bread leavened or unleavened, for pita, or injera, or King’s Hawaiian, or gluten-free crackers, or Rice Cakes, or those wafers that taste like packing peanuts; and we carry with us a multitude of understandings of what this meal *is*. The thing that unites us together this day is precisely *that* we are different—we see, and taste, and feel this holy meal in different ways; we experience this meal in our bodies in different ways—yet it is always sacred, mysterious, unexplainable, ineffable, and holy.

What other meal could contain within it the promise of Christ’s presence with us, the hope for something to come, the trauma of Jesus’ body broken and crucified, the assurance of unconditional grace, the opportunity to remember deeply the life of a great teacher and prophet, the demonstration of Christian community in its fullness, and the connection to both those who have passed on to glory and to those who have yet to be born? This meal—it means so much, yet it is so simple. A loaf. A cup. And our deep interconnectedness—that we may not have a clue what is going on, but when we approach this meal, together, something happens. When we accept the invitation to this meal together—with all of our doubts and all of our assurances, with all of our hopes and all of our crushed dreams, with all of our grief and all of our rejoicing, with all of our hesitations and all of our yearnings—when we accept the invitation to this meal, together, with all of that, God does *something*.

And to experience that *something* in our lives and in our world, my inkling is that we've gotta draw our circle a little bit wider and a little bit wider, join hands, and keep coming back. And when we do, the table will always be set, the invitation will always be extended, and there will always be enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.