

## **Sermon for March 4, 2018**

### **Welcome to the Feast**

#### **Deuteronomy 10:12-24 and Luke 14:7-14**

#### **The Reverend Roger Pancost**

In a collection of short stories about feasts the Reverend Cordelia Burpee of First Congregational, UCC, in South Hero, Vermont shares this memory,

“Things were hectic as we got ready to open the church doors for the dinner crowd of homeless, hungry, marginally employed, and lonely people waiting outside. It was always a scramble to get enough help and get ready on time, and sometimes the meals seemed just barely pulled together. But tonight was a good night. As people filled their plates and found places to sit, I noticed a tall, thin young man who was sitting on the edge of the stage and watching everything with interest.

I went over and introduced myself as I sat down next to him. ‘You new here? I don’t remember seeing you.’ He introduced himself as Philip and told me that he had tagged along with the Catholic church ladies who had come with dessert. ‘I wanted to see how things worked here and if there was anything I could do to help.’

He mentioned that he had just returned to town after a long absence and was still getting adjusted. He looked worn out but joked around and seemed happy to be with us. I invited him to come back anytime to help or just to eat.

He did return, and became involved in planning the meals. He replaced the paper placement and napkins with white tablecloths and linen napkins (which he washed and ironed each time). He set the tables carefully with fresh flowers that he’d convinced florists to donate. At the end of the meal the vases of flowers were offered to guest, so we scrounged more vases for the next meal. He greeted people at the door and escorted them to their table. To him they were honored guests and each meal was a celebration. He encouraged folks to share their stories. We celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and listened to updates on people’s health, housing, and employment struggles.

Eventually I heard Philip’s story. He was HIV positive and had been struggling for ten years to manage a variety of symptoms. He returned home because his symptoms were worsening. He had hoped to reconnect with his family,

but the parents who had kicked out their gay teenage son still wanted no part of him. He was devastated and casting around for connection to his hometown. He decided to help others feel the welcome he hadn't received.

Philip kept the meals going during the holidays and bad weather, sometimes by himself, because he never wanted anyone to show up and discover a locked door. In the process he transformed those meals into a joyous celebration of our common connection. Each evening was full of laughter and joking as folks drifted from table to table to greet each other.” (Christian Century, September 14, 2016, p. 22)

I share this story with you this morning because it offers a beautiful illustration of communion. First and foremost, communion is a meal of grace. When Philip found his way into the dining room at First Congregational Church he did not know if he would be welcome. Within a short period of time the pastor of the church greeted him and extended a welcome to him. Philip soon learned that he and all others are welcome at the table. This is true of communion. All are welcome to come to this table and share the gift of God's grace. At this table we are reminded that we are all members of God's beloved family.

When Rev. Burpee first welcomed Philip she was not aware of the difficult issues that he was dealing with. She didn't know that he was without a family, or a place to belong. Nor did she know that he was dealing with a serious health issue.

Every one of us comes to this table with our difficulties. On any given day, there are those who come to this table struggling with relationship issues. There are people who have medical concerns. There are those who feel that they have nowhere to belong.

The table of communion reminds us that whatever concerns, hurts, or challenges we have brought to worship, we are welcome here. We can share our complete selves, trusting that God's love washes over us.

Soon after Philip became a welcome guest at the dinners served at First Congregational church, he became a welcoming host. He did everything he could to help other people feel the welcome that he had not received from his family or neighbors. Philip wanted each person to feel like an honored guest.

Philip's actions reflect the teachings of Jesus who condemned the practice of honoring some people at a meal and excluding others. Jesus ate with all manner of folk, including his disciples, Pharisees, and those considered to be outcast of

society. For Jesus meals were times of celebration, and an inclusive fellowship that reflect the kingdom of God.

Like Jesus, Philip saw meals as a time of celebration. He encouraged people to share their special events including birthdays and anniversaries. He also made the dining hall festive with fresh flowers and linens. In doing these things Philip was extending God's grace.

We sometimes come to communion in such seriousness that we forget that it is a celebration. It is a celebration that we are in community with other people and with God. Philip, who had been rejected by his family, found a place to belong, and a group of people to love. That is the way it is with the church. This is a place where you belong.

Earlier this morning I spoke with the children about not locking others out. Philip is said to have kept the meals going during the holidays and the bad weather because he never wanted anyone to show up and discover a locked door. Empowered by God's grace, we keep the door open as we welcome all people to this table.

In concluding her story Rev Burpee writes, "Philip died a couple of years ago, but I think of him often. A mass written by Guillermo Cuellar includes these words, 'Let us go now to the banquet, to the feast of the universe. The table's set and a place is waiting. Come everyone with your gifts to share.'" I imagine being with Philip at that feast. He'll be the one greeting each of us with a smile and a bad joke and showing us to our seats." We give thanks for Philip's wonderful example. Amen.