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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 16:19-31; 22:7-30

1 August 2021

Fellowship and Communion

Opening Prayer:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome this morning to any and all guests. We are glad that you are here. Let us pray: God of relationship and steadfast love, open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to our neighbors that we would care for, walk alongside of, and notice each other in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. You have created us for connection with each other, with you, and with creation. Empower us with your Spirit, with your invigorating breath to open space in our lives for all people, no matter how like us or not like us they might be. Help us to listen intently and sincerely, to be present in all the ways that you are present to us. In Jesus name. Amen.

Message:

Summer of stories; summer of parables. The bible is full of stories. In our time together this summer, we have not discussed all of Jesus's parables in the gospels but have focused on a select few, specifically 7 of the long parables. In those stories, we have explored forgiveness and generosity, inclusion and ingenuity, and last week, security. Were these the only themes that we could talk about from these stories? No. Each listener would have had numerous opportunities for continued reflection and transformation just as we do today. We do our best though to think

about Jesus's life and ministry, his audience, their common home in rural Palestine, and how all of those realities might have shaped each person's listening.

Fellowship is the theme for our time together this morning. In the August church newsletter, I asked you all to reflect on who is invited to your table. Both of our stories this morning are about the table, about fellowship, about how we interact with people who are different than we are, how we reach out with compassion and empathy, and how something life-changing and life-giving happens mysteriously when we fellowship around a table.

In Luke 16, in Jesus's parable about the rich man and Lazarus, we are uncomfortably aware of where fellowship has not been offered. The worlds of the rich man and Lazarus, though not too far apart physically, are drastically far apart in experience. The rich man is dressed by his servants in the best clothes and daily seated at a feast, a table filled with so much that Lazarus longs to eat the crumbs that fall to the floor. As close to the rich man as he can get, Lazarus lays at the gate. Rather than fine clothes, Lazarus is dressed in sores, painful reminders of why he is alone and why he is longing for whatever pity that the rich man might extend to him whenever the rich man enters and exits his estate through the gate. Rather than being dressed and tended to by servants, Lazarus is cared for and cleaned up by dogs, who lick his wounds. His suffering and pain is so obvious that the stray animals desire to clean his wounds and care for him, yet the servants and guests of the rich man who daily walk by him can find no room at the table of their hearts for him. Unclean beggars have no place for welcomed fellowship. One thing that Lazarus does have, though, that the rich man does not in this story: his name. Lazarus is the only person in all of Jesus's parables who has a name. While everything else has been stripped from him, he is someone, a beloved human being, an image-bearer of God Almighty. He is Lazarus.

Lazarus and the rich man have one common experience: death. After death, though, the rich man is buried as would have been proper and honorable, but we do not hear what happens to Lazarus's body. Carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham, or to Abraham's side like a child embraced by a loving parent, Lazarus is comforted and cared for. The rich man is in Hades in torment, in agony, aflame. What a profound reversal! The last will be first and the first will be last. The rich man now longs for fellowship, for even a touch from Lazarus to appease his torment, but the great chasm, the expanse, the great canyon between them will not allow it.

For the first time in the story, we hear the rich man concerned about someone other than himself. He wants Lazarus, his errand boy, to go and speak to his five brothers. Unlike the rich man and his bigger storehouses in our story last week, this rich man has thought about others who might be joining him if they do not change their ways. But according to Abraham, it's too little, too late because all that his brothers need to hear is already in the scriptures as it was for the rich man. Sending someone back from the dead is not going to make any difference, a foreshadowing of the religious leaders' response to Jesus's resurrection. One final note though is that even in his agony, the rich man does not attempt to speak to Lazarus but only to Abraham, maybe still a sign of his assumed privilege, a sign that he still does not feel that he needs to lower himself to talk to someone of much lower status and importance. In addition, the rich man is still so conceited that he even attempts to order Abraham to send Lazarus like a servant for water or a messenger to his brothers. The very real chasm between them could also be a symbol of the black hole in the soul of the rich man, who cannot see past his own needs, desires, whims, and plans. Even after death in torment amidst the flames, the rich man has no room at the table of his heart to speak directly to or fellowship with the one who had lay in hunger and agony at his gate.

We fast-forward in Luke's gospel to Jerusalem, where Jesus is seated at another table with his disciples, a table prepared for Passover, the once-a-year celebration of God's divine rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. According to Luke, Peter and John have prepared the meal for their teacher and fellow learners. As they sit together, Jesus passes the cup around, asking them to divide it among themselves and telling them cryptically about how he will not drink wine again until the kingdom comes. Then he breaks the unleavened bread, telling his disciples that just as the bread was broken, his body will be broken too and given over for them. In the same way after the meal, Jesus tells them that the cup of wine that had been divided is the new covenant in his blood, which will be shed or poured out as the wine had earlier been poured out for them for their sustenance and fulfillment. At this moment, I can image the disciples squirming in their seats as they wonder at what Jesus is trying to explain to them: broken body and shed blood. What is Jesus talking about? Peter and John had already slaughtered the Passover lamb, so what is he trying to say?

Jesus continues: at this table sits the one who will betray me. Unlike the rich man who feasted with those that he wanted to and refused fellowship with Lazarus, Jesus's table remains open even to the very evil that seeks to destroy him in the heart and actions of one of his disciples. We can hear the disciples now. It's not me. Who is it? Who is Jesus talking about? Is it Matthew? He was a tax collector. Or maybe Simon, the zealot. Then they begin vouching for how committed they have been to Jesus, trying to prove to each other who is the greatest or the most important in the group so that no one would suspect their motives. I can imagine Jesus sitting their listening to their arguments as the conversation runs away and they get louder, bickering with each other, attempting to show their intellectual prowess and creativity.

And Jesus interrupts them: you will not be like the religious leaders, like the emperor, like the Roman governors or elite landowners. If you truly wish to be important, you will serve. You will suffer as you have throughout your whole time with me. You will not lord your authority or your great reasoning or your superior logic or your experience and testimony over those who follow alongside or behind you. You will be servants just as I have been your servant. You will sit at the table, even with those who might betray you. You will open space at your table for all people, no matter whether they are dressed in fine clothes or in terrible, painful sores. My example is your example. Just as my body and blood are broken and shed, so you will suffer for my name, so you will be persecuted for sticking up for the least of these, so you will one day be carried by the angels to Abraham's side in my kingdom.

As we come to the communion table this morning, who are you extending fellowship to? Who is allowed to sit at the table in your home as well as the table of your heart?

Closing Prayer before Communion:

Let us pray: God of fellowship and hope, we ask you for forgiveness. We confess that we have not always welcomed everyone at our tables. We have withheld invitations to fellowship for a multitude of reasons. Fill us with your spirit this morning as we come to your table. Empower the broken body and shed blood of Jesus to transform us and challenge us. Thank you that you have extended an invitation to each of us to share in fellowship with you at your table.