

May I speak in the name of the Triune God,
Who calls each one of us Beloved.
Amen.

Our reading from Proverbs this morning is blissfully short.
(And very well read, _____, thank you).

“Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great;
For it is better to be told, “Come up here” than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”

Most of the book of Proverbs consists of little sayings like this,
And if you wanted to,
You could skim right through the whole book,
All 31 chapters,
And probably find one to apply to any single situation
You might find yourself in,
And any single piece of advice you might want to hear.

Because the way that Proverbs frequently work
Is that they put two ideas side by side,
And you’re supposed to sort of rub them together
And find the middle part,
Because it’s not in simple yes or no, this or that, right or wrong answers
Where we find wisdom.
It’s in the middle. In the Mess.
Holding two ideas together until something new makes sense.
Wisdom isn’t just blindly subscribing to the traditions of your elders,
Passed down in pithy clichés.
Wisdom is knowing how to listen for new possibilities
Between the old and tired choices that keep us stuck.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is a little bit more long-winded than Proverbs.
But I think he’s doing the same thing –
Telling two little stories,
Giving us the chance to listen to both of them
And find the new possibility hidden between them.

The first story is about How to be a Guest;
And the second is about How to be a Host.

First, how to be a guest.
“When you come to a party,
Do not sit down at the place of honor,
For you might be shamed
By the Host,
Who has prepared that spot for someone else,
And who will take it away from you

And give it to someone else.”

Jesus is getting into our motives here,
Trying to get us to think about Why we are where we are.
Are you there to try to make yourself appear great?
Or are you there just to celebrate,
Content with whatever place at the table you receive,
Content to be surrounded by whoever happens to be near you?

To be a good guest, take the lowest place.
Don't expect that the party is for you.
Just come, and be glad just to be there,
And if the host honors you with their delight,
Then you will be filled with joy.

The second story is how to be a good host.

And Jesus gets into our motives,
Into our shadow side,
And starts to question the ways we build
So called connections and community.

In effect, he's asking:
When you throw a party –
What are you celebrating?

Are you celebrating your own success,
Your own worth, your own belovedness?

Or are you using yourself as an excuse
To invest in yourself,
Getting people you hope will repay you
To feel like they owe you something
So you can be given something in return?

Are you truly celebrating?
Are you really filled with delight?
Or are you manipulating people around you,
Hoping to be repaid?

Jesus says, that to be a good host,
You should just throw a party, and be glad to be there!
And honor everyone with your delight,
For then you will be filled with joy.

But what binds these two stories together?

Is Jesus really this concerned with how to be a guest?
With how to be a host?
While I would love to challenge us all,
When we show up at some gathering,
To take the lowest place and wash the dishes and take out the trash;

Or, when we're having a gathering, to walk to the nearest bus stop
And invite whoever is there to come in with us;

That Jesus isn't *primarily* concerned with how to be a guest, or a host.

(even though he is also concerned with those things,
and we should absolutely live that way.)

I think Jesus is *primarily* concerned with how to *party*.

Why do we party?
Because we want to celebrate.
Because we are filled with joy,
With delight.

Because we want to fill the world with LOVE.

One of our members,
Loran Meccia,
Loves to talk about her dad.
She says that when you were with him,
You couldn't possibly want to be anywhere else.
If you were in front of him,
You had his full attention,
That he was completely with you,
And he made you feel that you were the source of his delight.

How did he do it?
He called everyone his favorite.
She told me once that she called him,
And he was sitting with her brother and her sister,
And he answered the phone to say:
"Ah! It's my favorite daughter on the phone.
Hello, favorite daughter.
I'm just sitting her with my favorite son and my favorite daughter."

When Jesus is asking us to party,
He's asking us to get in touch with that deep-down core of our being,
Where we can truly connect with each other,
And see everyone,

Everyone,
Everyone as our favorite.

When I go to camp, or the ECMN TEC retreat, or a conference,
Or when I get ready to welcome the newest cohort of kids
As the new youth group at St. John's
I have this spirit come over me.
And it feels like this:
Everyone I meet, everyone I encounter –
I just *assume* they are
Awesome.
Even if I haven't figured out *how* they are awesome yet.

It's actually something I don't mind telling people,
Willing to be a little awkward sometimes:
"You're on the list of people I don't know very well yet,
But I think are incredible."

When you are a guest at a party,
Don't go in assuming you are going to be the host's favorite.
If you are, then celebrate with joy!
But if you aren't?
Turn to the person next to you,
And find your delight in them.

When you throw a party,
Don't expect people are there for you.
Throw a party to tell other people
How awesome and loved and worthy *they* are.

Jesus came down to earth
To show us what it means to be God's beloved,
To delight in God
And in all God's children.

And we have this chance, now, today, and always,
To stand in the gap of a culture that judges us
for how much money we make
or how tall we are
or how good looking we are
or what neighborhood we live in
or the color of our skin
or the success of our relationships
or what school we go to
or our ambitions
or our abilities.

And Jesus, today, tells each one of us:

You are my beloved.
Not for any of those reasons,
But because you *are*.

You are God's beloved.
Not one single one of us is worth more or less to God.
You are God's *favorite*.

You, just as you are.
You, just as the Spirit is helping you grow to become.

When I work with my teenagers,
I get them to do all sorts of interesting and spiritual things
Because I help explain to them
That we build trust
Precisely in the place where we overcome our awkwardness.

So my challenge to you all this morning is this:
In a few minutes, when we share the peace,
I want us all to do a little bit more.

Don't just say "peace."
Make eye contact with the person in front of you,
And tell them:
"You are God's beloved."

Or maybe tell them:
"You are so awesome. Amazing, Incredible. Even if I don't know you at all, you just are."

Or tell them:
"You are my favorite."
And if you're really bold, tell them *why* they are your favorite.

Imagine if we did this today.
Imagine if we went out from this place
And we had heard how awesome we are,
How delightful we are,
How much God favors us.

What could we do for each other?
What could we do for our schools that start this week?
What could we do for this neighborhood, this city, this *world*,
If we did it from the place of unshakeable conviction and real actual feeling
That we are loved, unconditionally, by God?

What would it be for us to come to church every week,
Not because we are religious,
But because we get so built up here

That we can take on all the problems we see in the world,
Knowing we are made more powerful here to go into that world,
And knowing that we can come here for comfort when we fail?

Try it. It'll be awkward. And it'll be *great*.

And it just might fill us all with love.

And the way of Jesus is the way of love.
And the way of love can change the world.
Amen.

(Be all my delights, be my everything)