

“Who Is Invited to the Party?”  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

About three months ago, there was quite the buzz in our media about the Salahi's, the party crashers who went to the White House Dinner party without being on the invitation list. Everyone knows that no one gets to enter such a high profile party without being invited. Yet, somehow the Salahi's were able to trick the security guards, the secret service agents and all who were involved in protecting the president. It is interesting that the president has to have such a complex system to ensure his safety, while most of us don't need all these steps to keep unwanted guests from coming to our tables. Our culture and practice dictate receiving a personal invitation before going to someone's house. Our social tables often reveal a great deal about our class, culture, and commitments. Think about it, who is invited to your table? To whose table are you invited? Are the people you share meals with very similar to you in their way of life and thinking? Most often than not, abiding by the unwritten social rules is the norm for most of us.

Today's Bible passage is about a call from God to a radical practice of hospitality at our tables! The passage from Deuteronomy 26 outlines the practices surrounding the Festival of the First Fruits. This was a festival described in the Hebrew Scripture where each Israelite is to take of the first fruit they harvest to the central shrine as an offering to the priest. This was very important because the priests came from the Levite tribe which did not own any land and depended on the offerings presented by the other tribes which were given land. But this offering did not end there. The people who brought the offering were supposed to sit at table with the Levites, the aliens of the land, the widows and the orphans. The people were instructed to have a celebration meal together with those they would have not normally associated with. This was seen not just as an act of charity and goodwill that they did once a year. It was a crucial practice that defined the very core of the identity of the people of Israel. They were to pray together in this festival to remember God's love and bounty given to them when they were wanderers without a land. So, the offering that is brought which is a tithe of their produce, their livelihood, is a significant reminder of who they are as a people. They are the people of God who were once wanderers but now have settled and farmed the land. They are always to remember to extend the same hospitality to those who are normally on the margins of land ownership and financial stability.

When the offering is presented to the priest, each Israelite is to give a particular (and exceedingly beautiful) recital of God's mighty acts that rescued Israel and the benefits those acts have brought to this specific Israelite (vss. 5b-10a). The recital is made not to the priest to whom the basket of first fruits is given, but directly to God. The basket is then placed before the altar by the Israelite. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house” (26:11).

Imagine this radical concept of celebration. When people normally have a national celebration, guests of honor are usually invited, basically the most powerful and famous people. I am sure that the guest list to the White House party which the Salahi's crashed was filled with people who were important and wealthy. I am sure no economically marginalized people were on the list. This is not because the White House leadership is bad. It is just what we have grown accustomed to. In most societies, the tendency is to look up to those who are in the power positions of the world. Having dinner with a homeless or a poor person when we are feeling charitable is one thing, but when we are having a big celebration or a party, we want to surround ourselves with people we are comfortable with.

The calling of Deuteronomy 26 to the practice of this festival is about the practices that will always lead the people of Israel to be a community of peace and wholeness. Their covenant and relationship with God was not about personal and individual prosperity especially if it came at the expense of others. The covenant is about establishing and sustaining a community of prosperity and peace for all of its inhabitants. This was at the heart of the calling of the people of Israel so that they can be an example for the other nations around them to teach a different way of being community, a way that is based on justice, love and peace, instead of greed and violence.

What is interesting in all of this is that God called this fairly insignificant group of people to be this kind of light for the other nations around them. God did not call an established empire that could have influenced more people. God called a small group of people without a lot of political power to subvert the entire region. The Israelites were called to do things not according to the standards of the dominant cultures around them, but according to the standards of God's love, compassion and justice. This is not to say that the empires and culture around Israel did not have faith in God. What was unique about Israel was that they were called to a way of life and a political system that embodied the love of God in their daily practices.

In his book, *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that, "What God is proposing is not a contract but a covenant. Covenants were a familiar feature of politics in the ancient Near East. They were secular treaties, usually between a strong nation and a weak one. They set out the terms of a relationship. The strong power would protect the weak, in return for which the weak would pledge loyalty and fealty to the strong. The Bible takes this idea and makes revolutionary use of it. It is now conceived of as a partnership between God and a people...There is no justified government without the consent of the governed."<sup>1</sup>

With God being the king/president of the land, we can see how the calling of Deuteronomy is not just about our meals and who is invited to our tables. It is about our whole way of life. No wonder Deuteronomy is one of the four Old Testament books most frequently quoted in the New Testament! It is cited more than eighty times in seventeen of the twenty-seven New Testament books.

What is encouraging about all of this is to remember that even though we may think of ourselves as insignificant, this is how God works. God does not work from the top down. Instead God works from the ground up. Even though Batavia is a small town and there is only about 300 of us here, God can do amazing things through us if we take this way of life as the community of God's peace seriously. In fact, each one of us is significant in this work of the kingdom of God. All we have to do is remember how God has worked throughout the ages: One person: Abraham, one people: Israel with twelve small tribes, and one teacher with twelve disciples.

Here is a story of a congregation that responded to the radical call of associating with those who are marginalized and oppressed in their community. This is the story of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in West Linn, Oregon. West Linn is an affluent suburb of the City of Portland. Last March this rich congregation in this rich community met a resident of Dignity Village, beginning a new partnership. According to the Presbyterian News Service, "Dignity Village is a cooperative venture among the city of Portland, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Self-Development of People and a group of homeless folks." This village is a community of people that provides temporary shelters (a tent city) to homeless people. "In his presentation at Emmanuel, resident Joe Palinkas spoke about his path to Dignity Village. Once a master floor

---

<sup>1</sup> Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*, 105.

and counter cover maker, Palinkas was no longer able to support himself after becoming legally blind. Joe touched hearts at Emmanuel and moved the congregation to learn more about helping make an urgent dream of Dignity Village a reality. Emmanuel's session approved a plan to raise funds for half of a unit, and encouraged other congregations to join the effort. One church member, Jim Long said this after his visit to Dignity Village, "I was reminded that I have way too much stuff, and so was challenged to consider how much more I could share. I decided to write a check when we ended the tour in support of this valuable resource in our area. In giving money I know I'm taking the simplest response to the challenge, but it is a beginning, and it seems like our church plans to continue this new relationship with Dignity Village, not just because we have enough and so can help them, but also, because we have so much to receive as well."<sup>2</sup> What is at stake in this kind of intentional community where rich and poor are connected in their commitment to justice is the very core of our relationship with God.

Today in your bulletins you will find a wallet size insert about the Self Development of People program of the Presbyterian Church. I hope that you will take it and put in your wallet as you pray about how God may be calling you to support this ministry. Every year through the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering we support this program as a church. In fact, the One World Goods Store in Rochester was started with grant money from the Self Development of people. So, today I invite you to look at how you may want to increase your involvement. Also, this could be a very good resource for someone you know who might be needing a loan or a grant to start a new business or a new project to overcome poverty and injustice.

May the challenge of Deuteronomy 26 and its call to the radical practices of justice and peace in community be an inspiration to us today and every day as we journey together as followers of Christ on the path of the realm of God. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.pcusa.org/sdop/mission](http://www.pcusa.org/sdop/mission)