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*A Different Kind of Banquet*

The warm aroma of plantains, yams, and arepas wafted through the air like incense drawing our attention to holy things for holy people. These are folks who had months before traversed the Dairen Gap on their way to the US, in search of new life often with their kids on their backs. Literally facing death at the ends of the world, in the hopes of a kind of resurrection in a strange land.

After facing the kind of trauma most of us cannot fathom, there they were. For most of them, stable housing, financial assistance, documentation status, were all still in limbo. But, Christmas was coming. You cannot just skip it. You must celebrate.

It happened on a December night a couple years ago just down the road. Full paper plates and red solo cups like the most ornate eucharistic vessels decorated tables as if they were altars. Music, dancing, eating, and joy in heaping amounts despite all they had been through. Santa brought gifts for kids a couple days early as adults laughed and cheered wildly as every kid got called forward. There was more than enough of everything to go around. Sometimes you bump into the reign of God and cannot help but watch as it takes shape around you. It takes different forms, but it always looks like a feast-- feels like a gift. Fills you up in ways you cannot quite explain.

Jesus said, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you."

We are so overwhelmed by the brokenness around us. Violence, fear, scapegoating, and threats are common. The ways of sin are clear. If ever we needed a feast it is today. We are hungry for God's reign to break through. Even when this feast upsets our own sense of earning and deserving. Even when the feast challenges our own ideas about who is included, we welcome it. We know that we are included too.

Our place around this table is safe and secure. It has been won for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. In the waters of baptism his death and resurrection have become our own. Our death is our ticket. And corpses don't brag. Or take their status too seriously, guard grace, defend themselves, hold onto the highest place, or hoard the food. In those waters we have died to all the

petty ways of this world and all of its tedious table manners and ridiculous requirements. There is not a limited quantity of Jesus Christ.

Alive: we have taken our seats alongside those with nothing left to lose. Those whose joy is resistance. Feasting is protest. Those the world ignores become our partners and teachers in proper feasting etiquette. They show us how it's done so we fit in at the great cosmic banquet where each person's name gets called to raucous applause from the communion of saints. It's just one big long table where we get lost in the gift of it all. Plates being passed, drinks poured, elbows bumping, laughter rising like incense. On the Thursday night of our ASP week we met at Martins Fork Lake. After winding through hills and hollers we made it to the pavilion overlooking the lake in the midst of those ancient green mountains.

It was a meeting of those serving and those being served. Volunteers and homeowners together. We started by standing in one circle, side by side, hand in hand in prayer. And then we ate. A meal of thanksgiving. People around picnic tables enjoying hamburgers, watermelon, and bags of chips for free. Generous portions of everything. Just like our God who breaks down all the walls that we build to divide ourselves, and sets a table where everyone gathers on level ground. Each one filled with the fullness of God.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. When one is that predictable we know where we can find them. At a feast-- even in the valley of the shadow. At a Christmas party with angels, in a circle where labels fall, in the midst of our own dead ends. Wherever we experience abundance instead of scarcity. When we experience forgiveness. When someone speaks of a tomorrow different from today and you find strength beyond yourself to step into it or advocate for it, and you even surprise yourself. When others the world labels, as *good as dead*- walk among us as signs of the resurrection and invite us to their tables for a Eucharist- a meal of thanksgiving.

In the prisoner, tortured, stranger. As the body of Christ we recognize ourselves there-- and where others might see scapegoats we reverence his real presence as we would the most ornate eucharistic vessels and pull up a chair around the altar in the world.

That's the sacrifice pleasing to God. Doing good and sharing what you have. Keep praying and acting. It's always worth it-- even when it feels foolish. God is the one who does impossible things like raise Jesus from the dead and you too. Be nourished and then go. Set tables, join one. When you find it here there's no telling where else you might bump into the reign of God. Always like a feast- forever a gift.