

“Working From God’s Guest List” based on Luke 14:12-14 & James 2:1-17
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT — April 15, 2012

From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

The table was a large one, but the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and the Doormouse were all crowded together at one corner of it. “No room! No room!” they cried out when they saw Alice coming. “There’s plenty of room!” said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

“Have some wine?” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.

“There isn’t any,” said the March Hare.

“Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.

“It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.

“I didn’t know it was your table,” said Alice; “it’s laid for a great many more than three.”

“Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter.

After a great deal more incivility, the rudeness became “more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off: the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse into the teapot.”

“At any rate I’ll never go there again!” said Alice. “It’s the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!”

Alice was right. It was a stupid tea party. It was also downright inhospitable.

Like Alice, Jesus found himself at an inhospitable meal. In his day, eating was a significant social occasion, with prescribed etiquette allowing guest and host to be honored. But he questioned the norms of his day, offering his own invitation etiquette: “When you give a dinner, don’t invite your friends, relatives, or rich neighbors because they might invite you in return and you’d be repaid. Invite the poor, crippled, lame, the blind. Then you’ll be blessed because they can’t repay you.” Startlingly, he prohibited what seems natural — inviting friends, relatives, neighbors. Instead, he wanted us to invite others who can’t give in return.

For Jesus, sharing life and bread at table are sacred. Meals are times of celebration and fellowship that foreshadow God’s kingdom. Table manners matter, especially when they’re about practicing the generosity and radical inclusiveness characteristic of God’s realm. So, Jesus invites us to invite anyone we’d normally consider an “outsider” or “stranger” to us, the most vulnerable or typically outcast.

We’d be fools not to acknowledge that “outsiders” presents risks. From childhood we remember the warning of the dwarves and how Snow White thought it couldn’t hurt to admit a sweet little old lady selling apples. Or, had the three little pigs said “Come in” instead of “not by

the hair of my chinny chin chin” there would have been no need for all that huffin’ and puffin’, but you can see the problem for the potential pork chops. There are strangers out there looking for trouble not hospitality.

Yet we’re called to invite others and be blessed by it. Remember the Mad Tea Party. The March Hare says to Alice, “It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited.” And Alice replies, “I didn’t know it was your table. It’s laid for a great many more than three.” Alice is rightfully indignant because there’s obviously ample space. Why are we blessed when we invite outsiders to the banquet? Because the table we offer is not mine, yours, or even ours; it’s God’s, and laid for a great many indeed. The invitation we extend is God’s not ours. We’re all guests, and God is our gracious, generous host.

But table manners aren’t only about who we invite; it’s about our welcome, too. I’ve never known a church that didn’t describe itself as “friendly.” But James says Christians often exaggerate their claims of friendship: “If you show partiality, you sin.” Favoritism is antithetical to our faith. So, James, like Jesus, urges us to open up our friendship circle.

Yet it isn’t easy to include those who seem different, especially since including others means demonstrating our friendship. For James, it’s not enough to assert love and friendship. “You do well,” he cautions, “if you really fulfill the royal law... [to] love your neighbor as yourself.” “What good is it if you have faith but do not have works?” So, concrete signs of our friendship are required or else both friendship and faith are dead.

Take that Tea Party again. Alice arrives and she’s told there’s no room when obviously there’s plenty of room. Then she’s offered wine — a strange offer, since she’s a little girl — but doubly strange because there is, in fact, no wine available. At the least, being welcoming means making room for others when they arrive, offering wine, and making sure we’ve actually got what we offer on hand.

Such welcome requires intentionality. This is a friendly church. But is this enough? We’d like to say we welcome all people, even perhaps that — without declaring it — we’re already Open and Affirming. Trouble is, there are people who’ve historically been blocked from a spiritually sustaining faith community: the poor, crippled, lame, and blind of our times, not the in crowd, but among whom Jesus ate; today’s outcasts like the lepers, tax collectors, and harlots he associated with; vulnerable ones in our day, such as the widow and the orphan he named. They’re those the Church has labeled sinners, Church doctrine’s called abominations, church communities have excluded, and congregations have quietly but firmly shunned because they just weren’t enough like us.

Can we blame such people for feeling unwelcome by the Christian Church? Can we fault them for being anxious about the reception they might receive if they walked through our doors? And can we not enter their psychic universe sufficiently to understand that it might take what seems to us an excessive effort to help them overcome an overwhelming reluctance to risk their emotional and spiritual safety? It’s sad we should have to make an Open and Affirming declaration, to have to name the categories of people who are welcome here. It’s embarrassing to talk about, inconvenient to address, and, in some ways, counter to our inclination as private people, embracing a largely private form of piety. But here, at least, is the place where I’ve arrived as I’ve struggled with this issue: Given the circumstances, it’s hard to see any other way for all people to be absolutely certain that we believe them to be made in God’s image, to be

God's children, and welcome into full participation in our church's life, leadership, ministry, and mission.

Jesus told us who to invite — all who are forgotten, excluded, cast out. I doubt he'd have accepted the only lame excuse we could offer to those we should include: Something like, "It's not that you're not invited, it's just that we didn't send you an invitation." I also doubt that he'd think it sufficient to merely encode our welcoming intentions in a statement. In my mind, an Open and Affirming declaration is needed, but, moreover, if it's the will of this congregation to make it, it's got to be lived into purposefully once the ballots are counted. All of this is needed, I think, if we're not going to persist in showing a kind of partiality and favoritism by default. For I remember Jesus' and James' teaching that to be vital and honest and true, our faith has to take on tangible forms, particularly when it comes to extending the radical hospitality of God's emerging realm, and living like the Easter People we're called to be.

The real and gracious people of this church would never cry, "No room! No room!" like those fictions the Hatter and the Hare. Yet the party we put on in God's name, around God's table, requires us to attend carefully to our guest list. Our moral and spiritual challenge is to seek opportunities and means to invite outsiders into our worship and fellowship, our leadership and service, especially those whom the world has excluded or marginalized. Then, to anticipate the obstacles to their warm welcome and full inclusion in our family circle once they arrive. May we never settle for paying lip service to friendship and our friendliness, but ever meet the challenge of seeking out and actively including even those we see as most different from us, that we may find blessing in building and living into God's loving and beloved community.