

Ephesians 1:1-14
“Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

October 29, 2017
Rev. David Pierce

It’s hard to not feel like we’re being set up this morning, in more ways than one. I’ve had not just a few conversations with people over the years about coming to church and top of the list for reasons why they don’t come? It feels like a set-up. We’ve all heard it said before, all the church ever does is ask for money, money, money. And of course, the offering plates are out this morning and in a few moments I’m going to invite you to consider making a financial pledge to the church for 2018. Your pledge, along with my pledge, along with the pledge of others, makes it possible for us to craft a budget that is both reasonable and responsible, responsible first and foremost to the call of Jesus to care for the poor and hungry, but also to help keep the walls up and light on, because the world needs places of rest—we need such places—where we can give up trying to prove ourselves and we can simply be as we are. A place, and a community, that makes us want to come in *and to go out*, because if we can have peace and mercy here, why can’t we have it everywhere? So yes, the church needs money, and maybe it feels like a set-up, because let’s be honest, giving money to the church isn’t exactly like buying a latte at Starbucks. If you order a venti pumpkin spice latte with whip at Starbucks and they give you a tall pumpkin spice latte with soy and no whip, you’ll give that latte back or they’ll give you your money back. But in the church, we don’t order off a menu, and sometimes we don’t always get what we want, and we don’t get our money back, at least not easily. At the same time, the reason we don’t order off a menu at church is because being part of the church is never about what we can afford. It’s never about how much we can pay.

The late Fred Craddock, who taught preaching for many years at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, told a story once about growing up in rural Tennessee next to some train tracks.

“I remember a number of mornings waking up and going into the kitchen to get some breakfast, and there’d be a strange, ugly looking, poorly dressed man at the table eating—just eating away, eating away. I was scared of him. And when he left, I would say, “Mom, who was that?”

She’d say, “Well, his name was Henry, and he said he was hungry.”

“Well, where’d he come from?”

“He came down the railroad tracks.”

People called them hobos. They walked the tracks begging, maybe stealing, getting what they could to stay alive. They'd stop by our house, and there, sitting in the kitchen eating what we had to eat, just eating it like they'd never have another meal. And I'd say, "Mama, weren't you scared of him?"

She said, "He was hungry."

"Well, I was scared of him!"

"Well, he was hungry."¹

I once heard it said, all I am is a beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. I can't speak for you, but I give money to the church so there can be bread when the beggar comes knocking on the door. I give money so there can be an open door.

This is essentially how the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the church at Ephesus. "Before the foundation of the world was laid, before you knew, before anyone knew, that someday you would walk the tracks knocking on doors in search of bread, before anyone called you worthless and said they were afraid of you, you were chosen in Christ to be loved. God chose you to be adopted, to make you a part of the family, to give you a seat at the table, to give you a piece of the inheritance—some bread. And why? Not because you are any great shake, but because this is who God is: God is love. God not only gives us a seat at the table and bread to eat, God gives up God's own seat at the table for us. This is the good news of the Gospel, that we are precious in God's sight. Paul's word for us? Saints. Can you believe it? Paul calls us saints.

Over the past few weeks we have been focused on stewardship, on what it looks like to be good caretakers of all God has given us. To spend our money and our resources wisely, making sure that we don't take more than we need, because God would have us make sure there is enough for everyone. Three Sundays ago we asked the question: What's for dinner? In a world of actual starvation and serious problems, what are we serving up here at Four Corners Community Chapel? Are we turning out ministries, and are we committed to ministry in a way that says we believe God actually means to use us to change the world? Last week we followed up with the question: What's a good time to eat? We often think about being good stewards of our money, but for most things money is not the answer. In times of suffering and loss, the church comes alongside us, helping us to be stewards of our pain and sorrow. The church helps carry us along until we can dance and rejoice again.

¹ Craddock, Fred (2001). "*Craddock Stories*," edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward.

This morning we are asking: Who's coming for dinner? And I thought it might be helpful, in asking this question, to get a sense of who is already here. So, I thought we'd take a roll call. I'm hoping you'll work with me in doing this because if you don't, things may get really awkward between us. What I'm going to do is all for a group of people and if you're part of that group, or if you could ever see yourself as wanting to be part of the group, would you just let us know that you're here? You can just say, "here," or if that feels too out of place for church you can throw your hands in the air or get up and do a little dance.

Let's start with a group that I'm pretty sure is in fact here. Are there any choir members or any wannabe choir members here today, anyone who can sing or any singers who don't care that they can't sing? There's an old hymn that says, "Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy praise." I'm pretty sure its talking about the Holy Spirit, but give thanks for all those who, filled with the Holy Spirit, tune our hearts to praise and generally speaking, keep us on tune. We're glad you're here.

Are there any greeters here today? Anyone who likes to throw a good party, to invite their friends to come over to sit on their couch and eat the food in their fridge? Anyone who takes absolute joy in watching people walk in the door? You are what the Psalmist calls the "Doorkeepers into the house of God." Without you our first impressions of church might be sad and lonely. Because of you we know that what Jesus said is true, "Whosoever will, let them come." The church can't have too many people at the door. Thank you for being here.

How about any kitchen workers, any pancake flippers and pot scrubbers? All of you who serve behind the counter or around the tables here at church or who make meals for the sick and homebound, are you here? You are the bread-breakers, the fellowship makers, the ones who can stretch a few crumbs to feed an entire army. We bless you.

Deacons, are there any deacons amongst us today? You are the bread providers, the conscience of our ministry, reminding us that whatever we do for the least we do for Jesus and whatever we don't do for the least we don't do for Jesus. Because of you compassion has a face and sanctuary is more than just a meeting place. Bless you.

All you teachers of children and holders of babies, who will still get down on the floor for us, where are you? Too often we hear it said that our children are our future. Yet

you insist that they are more than our future, that they are our present hope. Keep reminding us and we will keep blessing you for it.

I imagine one of the largest groups here today is the missionaries and peacemakers, the witnesses and testifiers. We're talking about all of you who look around at the world and all its hunger and havoc and unjust suffering and who dare to speak a different narrative. All you who work the soup kitchen line, who tell us it's a good idea to send money and goods to people on the other side of the world, or just on the other side of Cumberland. All you who bring in canned goods and cereal boxes, who keep less for yourself so others can have more. Are you all here? We're so glad you're here.

Then there are the Trustees and members of the building crew, those of you who keep watch over the roof and walls, who make sure this building stands as a visible sign to our community of what God is doing. So recovering alcoholics and drug users and widows can all have a place to meet and belong—so we can have a place to belong. All you stewards of our earthly gifts, are you here? Thank you for being here.

How about members. Are there any church members here this morning? I know there's at least a few. You could make a lot of what it means to be a church member these days. Some folks go around acting like it's a status thing, like it somehow affords them the best seat in the house. I don't have any time for that. If you ask me, a church member is someone who's taken a hard, honest look at the lot of us, figured out that we're not much to look at, but has decided, "These are God's people and I'm sticking with them." God bless the members.

There is a group here today that I'm not going to ask to speak up. It's all you who will ask me on occasion, is there anyone I can be praying for? If you didn't know there are people in this church who are praying for you, there are. We don't ask them to speak up. We'll just ask them to keep doing what they're doing.

Most of our young children and middle and high school students aren't in here right now. If they were here, I'd ask them to shout out and be recognized. But to all of you who are under the age of 18, who represent what scripture calls, "the dreamers," let me just say that there is going to come a day when you are going to question your commitment to this thing called church, when your parents won't make you come anymore and you'll have to decide for yourself what it's all worth. In that moment, should you decide it's not worth

anything, all that may mean is that it's time for you, the dreamers, to come up with a new dream for us to dream. Could you do that? Could you come up with a new dream for your church. We're listening and we're glad you're here.

And lastly, though just for now, are there any worshipers here today, any who are prepared to say what they believe? Are there any seekers of the truth, any desirers of mercy and doers of justice? And there any lovers of Jesus? Are there any worshipers here today?

We are quite the group. If I didn't know any better I'd say that only God could put a group like this together. Makes me wonder what God is up to, and what wonder God is going to do with us all next. Amen.