

There is Love All Around Us

August 31, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Luke 14: 7-14

Last night, on a beautiful late summer's evening, a dozen of us sat around our next-door neighbors' backyard table, sharing a meal of grilled chicken and corn on the cob and cucumber salad and a delicious chocolate peppermint ice cream cake. We passed around an adorable newborn baby and caught up on each other's lives.

Meanwhile, as Minneapolis and the Catholic church faces the aftermath of a horrific school shooting, and as armed National Guard troops and gigantic desert-sand colored military vehicles patrol our nation's capital while the presidential administration contemplates deploying federal troops to Chicago and to South Station in Boston, how can we dine and laugh with friends while our American civilization is facing the greatest threat of our lifetime? What's that expression? That Nero fiddled while Rome burned? What would Jesus say?

Well, the 14th chapter of Luke is about not just one dinner party, but four of them. I find it interesting that Luke includes four dinner party stories in a row. Our lectionary reading for this 12th Sunday after Pentecost is the second and third of these stories. The first dinner party was a sabbath meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. During the gathering, Jesus healed a man.

A side note here -- I was raised on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which was a 1952 revision of the 1901 American Standard Version, and then remember when the New RSV came out in 1989. I totally missed that there is now the NRSVue – updated edition. I guess we were all too busy in 2021 dealing with the pandemic to notice the new biblical scholarship!

I mention that because the updated edition is nearly identical to the NRSV, except for one word. It has replaced the unfamiliar “dropsy” – as in “Jesus heals a man with dropsy” with “edema”. I don't know what dropsy is, but I do know edema when I see it. Jesus healed a man with badly swollen ankles,

a condition that can indicate serious health issues. Discussion ensued among the religious leaders about whether it was lawful to cure people on the sabbath, but Jesus defended himself and his ministry of healing. We are to save lives, even if that requires breaking the rules to do so.

The next dinner party story is today's lectionary reading, about whether you claim the place of honor or wait to be recognized. And then the third about broadening the invitation list to dinners that we host. Finally, the fourth is about a dinner where those invited made excuses about why they couldn't attend. So what does Jesus' teachings about dinner parties say to us here and now?

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. That reminds me of a dinner at Boston's No Name Restaurant. Did you ever go there during its 100-year run on the Fish Pier in the Seaport? It was famous for being non-descript restaurant where you would go and wait in a very long line, to eat seafood at plain long picnic tables with plastic table cloths. I remember going with a group of friends on a beautiful weekend evening this time of year. The line was quite long, maybe about 150 people standing and chatting. As we arrived at the end of the line, the host came and asked how many were in our party, and took us immediately, past all those who had been waiting. I think he was just shaking things up a bit for fun. I remember thinking, I guess the last are first tonight, but I also felt a bit uneasy, because it certainly wasn't fair. We would have been happy to wait our turn but the host invited us to front of the line. We weren't some sort of "Karens" demanding to bypass the line to be seated. (Only those named Karen can make that joke ...)

But the parable Jesus shared wasn't about waiting in a line, it was about the head of the table, the place of honor. When I was growing up, my parents had a rectangular-shaped dining table that had four wooden chairs, one with arms and three without. My dad sat at what was called the head of the table, in the chair with the arms, my mother at the other end, and my brother and I on either side. My parents were so glued to their traditional places that after we both left for college, they sat down for dinner at the ends of their table, but couldn't pass the salad bowl without getting up out of their chairs. I don't know which one of them came up with the idea of putting the salad bowl on a placemat so that they could pull it back and forth between them. I never could figure out why they didn't just sit on the sides of the table! In Jesus' story, the head of the table is an important place of honor – and Jesus is reminding us that we occupy it by invitation, not by demand.

I want to go back to Nero. As I've confessed previously, I know very little about the history of Rome or ancient or medieval times. But thanks to Wikipedia, I now know that Nero became emperor about 20 years after Jesus' death, at the age of 17. He was born in the year 37 and was an actor and a poet and a musician who liked to perform, which made him popular with regular people. He did not play the fiddle, because that wasn't even a thing for another 1,000 years or so, but he could have played the lyre or a similar stringed instrument. Ten years into his reign in Rome, there was a huge fire that began on July 19th and burned for ten days, destroying about more than 2/3 of the city. Some thought it was Nero's incompetent leadership, while others accused him of starting the fire to clear land for his planned "Golden House." He in turn blamed the Christians and intensified his persecution of them in his power struggles that ultimately led to his demise in the year 68.

If you line this up with the timeline of Paul's life, the intersections are interesting. Earlier this spring, we read about Paul's first imprisonment in Philippi in about 51, and the book of Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome in the early 60s. Some say that Paul was beheaded by Nero's order. Thus the phrase "Nero fiddled while Rome burned" evolved over the centuries, likely influenced by the quite negative reputation that he earned for the decisions he made while he was in his position of power.

But I would question whether the legend is fair at all – either to Nero or to music itself. Music leads to creativity, clearer thinking; it rejuvenates our bodies and feeds our souls. It might have been even worse if Nero didn't have the creative outlet that music and the arts provided for him. Likewise, dinner with friends is not an escape, but a necessary refueling of both our bodies and our spirits so that we can face the coming days with energy and commitment. In either case, it's about balance and the purpose of our dinners and our music, which is to prepare us to do our part to heal the world.

There is much to do. Even though the disasters continue to bombard us each day, in illegal and unconstitutional orders, or the diversion of public servants from the places they are needed, or wasteful attacks on renewable energy or lifesaving medications, there are things that each of us can do, and there are signs of progress.

You can tell there is progress when those who have demanded a place of power at the table start rambling and making comments such as the one who claimed that “all the demonstrators in DC were 90-year-old white hippies.” I have no idea why the official (who was speaking three days prior to his 40th birthday) felt the need to pretend that was the case. It hasn’t been even remotely true, but it made me laugh. If my uncle were still alive, he would be 90. And he was definitely a hippie in the 60s and early 70s, with long hair and beads, living in Haight Ashbury, managing a bookstore, and working on a huge macramé wall-hanging that had been commissioned by the Bank of California. I don’t know if he was among the crowds of his generation who protested the Vietnam War or if he would be out protesting now, but the protests of the past seem as relevant today as always: for justice, for peace, for love, for a fair and equitable sharing of resources for the common good. What I do know is that today’s crowds of protestors are multi-generational, a reflection of the treasured diversity of our American society. There is something that each of us can do to protest in our own way, and we’re definitely not doing it alone. Remember that Jesus’ talk of dinner parties was not in the midst of a peaceful, blissful time of leisure for the majority of the people. The Roman empire was a brutal, dangerous time for most. We too are living in precarious times, and the fall will likely fall apart more before it gets better.

And it is fall, with a bit of chill in the air this morning. (Here, I’ll invoke a bit of the spirit of Brian James who often began his financial reports with a cartoon from his collection.) I’ve had a recent New Yorker cartoon on my desk this week. It is a drawing of two people on the deck of a vacation cottage at the coast, with the beach and ocean and a sailboat in the distance. They are dressed casually, she wearing a light jacket and he with a baseball cap and sunglasses. They have their glasses of wine on the railing, and he says to her, “I can’t believe that the summer, and civilization, are almost over.”¹

Civilization as we know it may indeed be ending. Decades of working together for the common good, with environmental cleanup, and affordable housing and health care, and publicly-funded medical research, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs. That could be ending. Or it could be that the civilized “society” of uber-elegant dinner parties and lifestyles, with certain people claiming

¹ Christopher Weyant, The New Yorker, August 19, 2025.

wealth and status and power is ending, as more and more people understand the damage that wealth inequity wreaks on us all, threatening the society that we value.

Into the dawn of this new season, I take with me Jesus' timeless teachings about dinner parties:

1. Save lives, even if it requires breaking the rules.
2. Don't demand your own place of power or recognition.
3. Reach out to include people who are different from yourself.
4. And respond when you are invited.

And with that, love will lead us, together, into a new season. Amen!

