

**THE WELCOME TABLE**  
Randall Tremba  
August 28, 2016  
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Jeremiah 2:4-13**

*Listen up people. I brought you into a land with plentiful fruits and other good things. But you have defiled my land.*

**Luke 14:1-14**

*“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, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

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I recently read *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin in which he indicts white America for turning a blind eye to Jim Crow laws, for allowing lynchings by the thousands, and for sitting smugly at the table of plenty while blacks were banished.

That’s one way to defile the land.

*Listen up people. I brought you into a land with plentiful fruits and other good things. But you have defiled my land.*

I had *The Fire Next Time* on my mind when I heard the voice of Jesus saying, *when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.* Which is to say, welcome everyone to the table. And just like that a certain Negro spiritual popped into my head.

*I’m gonna sit at the welcome table,  
I’m gonna sit at the welcome table,  
I’m gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.*

The second verse goes like this.

*I’m gonna feast on milk and honey  
I’m gonna feast on milk and honey one of these days.*

Really!?! How can you be so sure?

When you’re sitting in the dirt with nothing but a crust of bread in your hand for 300 years, where does such bodacious hope come from? How can that kind of light shine? How can you keep singing: *I’m gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days?*

For 300 years white masters told enslaved African Americans that God would bless them in heaven—one of these days—as long as they were compliant and submissive here and now on earth. And then the masters read to them the words of St. Paul from the Holy Bible: *Slaves, obey your masters in all things.* (Col. 3:22)

*So you see, said the white preachers, God wants you to be content with your lot in life. Your place has been ordained by God. Obey your masters now and you will be rewarded later. There’s gonna be pie in the sky by and by one of these days.*

And so when enslaved Negroes sang, *I’m gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days,* the masters grinned, nodded, and laughed up their sleeves.

Look, they said, these illiterate, gullible, docile slaves are content with crumbs because they think that one day in heaven, they’ll walk the streets of glory, sit at the table and feast on milk and honey.

Well, maybe so. Maybe so, said the white Christians. I guess that would only be fair. But for now, we live in luxury while they lick our boots.

That's one way to defile God's land and God's name.

*Listen up people. I brought you into a land with plentiful fruits and other good things. But you have defiled my land.*

Still those slaves kept singing. But I guess the master class stopped listening by the time they got to the next verse.

*I'm gonna tell God how you treat me  
I'm gonna tell God how you treat me one of these days.*

And they missed the next one, too.

*God's gonna set this world on fire one of these days.*

Where does such hope come from? How does that kind of light stay lit? How can you keep on singing that song with a boot on your neck?

I'll tell you how.

Little did the masters know that those enslaved people had taken the gospel of Jesus to heart. Jesus said the kingdom of God was coming to earth. And they believed it. They could taste the day when they'd be welcome at the table of plenty.

We now know that spirituals such as *swing lo, sweet chariot comin' for to carry me home* were not solely about going to heaven later. It wasn't so much the Jordan River they were looking over but a river nearby. It wasn't a band of angels but agents of the underground railroad ready to carry them north to freedom.

*I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.*

And then one of those days arrived.

Rosa Parks defiantly sat down. And Martin Luther King boldly stood up proclaiming a dream, a vision of a transformed America where all were treated fairly and justly. And just like that black Americans made up a new verse to the old song.

*I'm gonna be a registered voter one of these days. And then another verse. I'm gonna get my civil rights one of these days. And yet another. I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth counter one of these days!*

But no matter how many verses came rolling out, that song almost always ended with this: *All God's children gonna sit together. All God's children gonna sit together one of these days.*

I don't know how that song keeps going, but it does. I don't know when that day will fully come. But I do know this: the sooner white people realize that the so-called race problem in America is not so much a black problem as it is a white problem the sooner that day will come. The sooner we realize that race in America is not so much a black problem as it is a white problem the sooner that day will come.

Or as Jesus put it: *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind and you will be blessed.*

*After all, we're all gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.*

I don't know when that day will fully come, but in the meantime let us work hard, pray deep and sing loud so that day will come sooner than later.

