

When God Throws a Party

Psalms 145:8-19 Luke 14:12-24

As we wrap up our summer series in Luke, I'd like to complete it with one of the parables of Jesus that is unique to Luke.

There are *three* parables that are unique to Luke's gospel. In some ways they reflect the heart of the gospel. They are the heart of *Luke's* gospel because they contain elements and stories that communicate the heart of the *entire* gospel, which is the heart of love that God has for the lost, the marginalized, and the hurting, and they contain within them the call to Christ's Church to join in God's efforts of welcoming all of God's children to the feast of grace.

One of the parables that is unique to Luke, perhaps the most well-known, is the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Then there is the beloved parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The third parable that is unique to Luke, which is lesser known, is the parable of the great banquet, for lack of a better title. That's the parable I want to reflect on this morning to wrap up this series in Luke, because it—like the other parables—represents the heart of the gospel, and encapsulates Jesus' mission and, by association, the church's mission.

Here, in chapter 14, we catch up with Jesus as he goes to the house of an important leader of the Pharisees for a dinner party. As mentioned last week,

Jesus had a fraught relationship with the Pharisees and often had tense interactions with them; we're about to hear one of those.

Luke breaks up this dinner party scene into 3 acts. As the party begins, a sick man wanders in off the streets, which wouldn't have been uncommon in those days since doors were often open in small villages and all kinds of people wandered about. So this guy wanders in, and Jesus heals him... *on the Sabbath*, which was a big no-no. Jesus broke the law by doing that; so, things are off to a tense start—that's act 1. Then, Jesus chastises the guests for their seating choices, as he watches some people assume that they are guests of honor and take seats by the head of the table—that's act 2, and the tension is building. And, now—in act 3—Jesus turns his attention to the host of the dinner party, and this is where we pick up the story...

Luke 14:12-24

¹² Jesus said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"¹⁶ Then Jesus said, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many."¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now."¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies."¹⁹ Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am

going to try them out; please accept my apologies."²⁰ Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come."²¹ So the servant returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his servant, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."²² And the servant said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room."²³ Then the master said to the servant, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

This is the word of the Lord!

Pastor and Bible teacher NT Wright said that he preached a sermon on this parable years ago, emphasizing the extraordinary way in which Jesus tells his hearers to do something that must have been as puzzling to them then as it might be to us now. Don't invite just your friends and relatives to dinner: invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. And he said the sermon had a strange and unintended effect: In the course of the next week following the sermon he received dinner invitations from 5 people who had been at church that Sunday morning. And he said he was too polite—and too afraid—to ask which category of guest they thought he fit into: did they consider him poor, crippled, blind... or just lame.

This scene from Luke is a social disaster, which has lost all sense of good manners or decorum.

To begin with, Jesus tells the guests that they are being presumptuous by assuming that they are very important people as they all try to take seats of honor at the table. So, try to be a little more humble, okay?

Then the tension builds as Jesus tells his host, in front of everyone, that he doesn't know how to throw a proper party. And, in saying that to the host, Jesus insults the guests too. He says, in effect, "You shouldn't have invited *these* people; you should have invited a bunch of social rejects that you've never even met before – and then, you would have been blessed."

Now, the party just becomes awkward as one of the guests blurts out a comment—and I picture this guy maybe a little drunk with too much wine, trying to fix the awkward moment with a toast to **everyone**: "Blessed are *all people* who will eat at the feast in heaven." Nice try. But Jesus doesn't relent.

Because after this toast to all the good people, Jesus responds with a story. A story intended to let this guest, and all of the guests, know what the Kingdom of heaven is really like. That is, what it's like when *God* throws a party!

The Kingdom of heaven, Jesus is saying, is first of all for those who respond to the invitation with a resounding yes. I'm all in. I'm there! That is the hoped-for response to the invitation. God is inviting you—so, please come!

What Jesus is talking about here (in the entire chapter of Luke 14 from beginning to end) is whole-hearted discipleship. Whole-hearted discipleship. In the rest of Luke 14, Jesus follows up this parable by talking about things like choosing *daily* to follow him, and counting the cost of following him using a couple of practical illustrations like making sure you can finish a construction project before you start it, and so forth. So the rest of Luke 14 needs to be read, along with this parable. It's about responding to the invitation with a wholehearted yes. I'm all in. I've considered it, and have decided it's worth it.

And in our parable this morning... at first glance it looks like a story about people who reject God outright, and say no to God's invitation to his banquet. But that isn't what's happening here. It's actually a story about those who say yes *at first*, and then "nah" later. It's about those who say, "I'd love to come to your party!" when the initial invitation goes out, but then make excuses when the date and time are set and they are told to come on in.

Because in Jesus' day there were two invitations given for a banquet. The *first* invitation was to announce the banquet: I'm throwing a party and it's coming up soon, so don't leave town or make big plans—give me some time to prepare it. And people were expected to respond to that first invitation with a solid yes or a solid no (as Jesus said in another place, "Let your yes be yes, and

your no, no.” “No” is an okay answer; just be honest). Then the *second* invitation was given when the banquet was ready, sent to those who said yes to the first invitation. And *those* folks were then expected to drop everything and make their way. Because they said they would. So, in the parable, the servant goes out and tells them, “Come, everything is ready now.”

This story is not about people who say no right away, but about people who have accepted the first invitation and said yes, but then bail out on the second invitation, with silly excuses.

There are a couple things from the parable to take note of as they relate to whole-hearted faith, and the response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him:

1. First, is that the excuses the people give for not coming to the banquet are ridiculous. So ridiculous, that they’re funny.

Jesus was funny—we often miss that; some of his stories and illustrations were intended to cause people to giggle, because they’re so over the top in their caricatures, or some elements of the story are so silly that they’re humorous; and this parable has those elements, to make his point.

These people are invited to a banquet and at first they say yes, but when the time comes to go to the party, they say things like “I can’t come because I just bought a piece of land and I have to go look at it.” What?!? You’ve been

invited to a great party and you'd rather go look at dirt?!? And besides, didn't you go and look at the field *before* you bought it? That doesn't make sense. That's like saying I just bought a large piece of property over the phone and I have to go look at it. Who does that?

Another guy says "I just bought some beasts of burden and I have to go try them out." That doesn't make sense either. That's like saying "I just bought a couple cars on line and I have to go test drive them." Again, why didn't you do that *before* you bought them? Besides, your oxen will still be there tomorrow. Come to the party, man!

The last guy says "I've just recently gotten married." Now that's a much better excuse. But it's clear that this couple is now home from their honeymoon, so certainly they could take a few hours and join the party. Besides, it's good for a young couple to get out and meet some people and socialize.

These are silly excuses. And that's Jesus' point: everyone is invited to God's kingdom celebration, but the irony is (the silliness and the irony) is that the religious people of his day said things like, "I'm too busy doing my religious duty and obeying God's rules" which actually causes them to miss what God's Kingdom is *really* about—mercy and relationship and joy! Jesus is subtly comparing their

version of religion to things like looking at a dirt field, or testing out beasts of burden, or wanting to remain socially isolated when they didn't need to be.

2. A second thing to notice is that what is missed because of the excuses isn't some horrible, boring, onerous thing. What is missed is... a party! A banquet; a feast.

Jesus uses the same celebratory image in many other places in the gospel, including the parable of the prodigal son, when the father throws a party after his son returns home. And in the book of Revelation, when God brings all things to fulfillment and makes all things right, the image that is used to describe this glorious victory is... a celebration!

This is supposed to be enjoyable! Notice, Jesus doesn't say that the Kingdom of God is like going to the DMV to get your driver's license renewed. Or, the Kingdom of God is like being sequestered in a room to take an exam on a subject you're not sure you understand completely.

He says... a man gave a banquet. A party. A feast. And you know what parties and banquets are like in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean! How many of you have been to a party or a wedding reception—or even a funeral reception—for one of your Italian, Jewish, Greek, Arab, or Persian friends? These people know how to throw a party! It involves an amazing spread of food, usually

a band playing music, wine flowing, dancing, and laughter... people enjoying one another. Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding (turning water into wine) to bring joy to that event. And, to save the host from a hospitality nightmare—in that culture you don't dare run out of wine at a wedding party! But, largely, turning water into wine on that occasion was to add joy to a party.

When God asks us to give him our everyday lives, he is inviting us to a banquet—something that is meant to be enjoyable, and lead to joy and fulfillment! Even if, at times, it is challenging, as we've heard these last few weeks in Luke. Challenge and joy are not mutually exclusive! We can rejoice and celebrate, even when things are difficult or we have hard work to do; in fact, sometimes that's what we need! That's why it was so fun to have our neighborhood bbq last Wednesday. With everything going on in our country and the world, it's good to take time out to play and eat and have fun and laugh together. And serve our community all at the same time.

So... Jesus says the Kingdom is like you and me being issued an invitation to a banquet, a party, and the response he desires from us is a resounding yes. With our whole self. I'm all in. Now, and later.

There is one other clear message in this parable that is calling out to be noticed, and that is this: Jesus is also saying that the Kingdom banquet is not only

for us, and people just like us. God wants his party filled up with everyone! There is plenty of room! And we who have been invited *become the inviters*. Go out, Jesus says, and bring people in. Because, the kingdom of God is spacious.

The message is that we are to invite not just our friends and relatives, but people who have been labelled by society as not worth it. Jesus uses the examples of “the poor, crippled, blind, and lame,” and in his day those were the folks who represented the low rung of society.

He says, invite them. And they’re invited because *that’s who God wants there*. “Go out into the highways and byways and *compel* them to come in” the host says. There is plenty of room. And, at God’s parties, everyone is on level ground.

That’s the practical side of this parable. To open our homes, our hearts, and our church—to anyone and everyone whom God desires to be seated at table with Jesus in the Kingdom. And that includes people not like us. Jesus has a special place in his heart for the hurting, the lost, and the disadvantaged. And that may indeed be some of you here, today and online—and if that is you, welcome to God’s party! God’s banquet feast of grace & mercy.

This is the practical side of the teaching. But there is a deeper question for Christ’s **church** in here. The deeper question is: what kind of community are

Christ's churches forming? Are churches, in their life *together*—our fellowship and our ministries—providing a banquet feast of *community* that reflects this Kingdom, so that the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame feel welcome, and hear and experience and receive good news, and experience a foretaste of the heavenly banquet?

The challenge of this parable/teaching isn't whether or not we'll invite a disadvantaged or needy person over for a dinner party *instead* of our close ones. The challenge is to recognize the *nature* of the kingdom of heaven itself and the very character of God (which we heard described in Ps.145), where everyone is on level ground, and those who are invited to the party *stay*, and become friends, and part of community. Henri Nouwen calls this hospitality of heart—where people don't just come, and then go. But where they find a home among us, and with us, just as we have found a home—in God, and in each other.

If we want to be part of this Jesus movement, saying yes to this banquet, this is the sort of party we are joining: where the least of these are sought after and invited in and treated as honored guests—but even more than that, as honored *friends*.

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