

The Great Banquet

Our Gospel reading is Luke 14:15-24. In the first 24 verses of this chapter of the Third Gospel, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God as a banquet. The setting of this instruction is an actual banquet, hosted by a leading Pharisee, the conservative party of the Jews who were some of Jesus' fiercest opponents.

Follow as I read **Luke 14:15-24**.

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 to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.* **17** *At the time for the dinner he sent his slave 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 regrets.'* **19** *Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.'* **20** *Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'* **21** *So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, '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 slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'* **23** *Then the master said to the slave, '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.'* "

At meals with his disciples, both in his earthly and post-resurrection appearances, Jesus taught truths, such as being the Bread of Life and the source of the joy that accompanies times of feasting and banqueting. He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant's hope for the Messianic Feast (Is. 25:6-9; Ps. 23:5). At mealtime, we should invite Jesus as our Guest of Honor. And when we invite him as Guest he becomes the real Host and we are the guests who learn from him and even feed upon him. This is what happened at the home of this Pharisee, who got more than he "bargained for" in inviting Jesus.

Jesus at this meal transitioned from being guest to teacher. He first challenged the way the Pharisees sought prestige for themselves and overlooked the needs of the poor and outcast instead of practicing genuine hospitality. And in response to the comment about their supposed hope of the heavenly feast of God, Jesus began to speak about The Great Banquet of God and those who were invited and particularly about the surprising responses to God's invitation.

This "certain man" whom Jesus described in the parable as preparing the great banquet (16) is God the Father. Jesus refers to himself as the servant/messenger who is sent to issue the Father's invitation to God's Feast.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he preached the availability of the kingdom of God (Mk 1:15). Because of his incarnation and subsequent sacrifice on the cross, the way of access into the kingdom would be available to all who would repent and believe the Good News. In this parable Jesus says that the Father/Host was making preparation for his people to gain entrance into the kingdom of God, which is what salvation is all about. The Father/host can now send out the second wave of invitations because “everything is now ready” (17).

In speaking of the host’s preparation of the banquet Jesus is likely referring to his ministry and especially his coming suffering, death and resurrection which would be God’s gracious provision for the salvation of all who believe. Following his passion, sin-bearing death on the cross, Jesus cried in triumph, “It is finished!” (Jn. 19:30). And then, with his resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, all would be made ready for life in the kingdom of God. Through the Christ of the cross and the empty tomb the Father has made everything ready for us to enter his banquet hall immediately. This is the invitation of the risen Christ (Rev. 3:20; 19:9).

Heaven is the unspeakable paradise restored that will mean perfect joy and the fulfillment of everything that life was intended to be. And the glory of this New Creation will be greater than that of the original paradise. It will be the home of God’s redeemed creatures, whereas the glory of the first paradise was the glory of God’s innocent creatures. Thus there will be the added dimension of everlasting gratitude for God’s amazing, restoring grace, as we worship forever the Lamb upon the throne in God’s great feast called heaven.

As was customary in the Middle East, the host in Jesus’ parable sends out two invitations. The first invitation was the formal one to secure the assent of the guests that indeed they would be attending the feast on the announced date. Then the host would purchase the meat and all of the food and wine according to the number of guests who committed themselves to attend. The second invitation was issued on the evening of the feast when the servant was sent to the guests to say, “*Soup’s on. Come and get it!*” Then the guests would immediately drop what they were doing to come to the banquet while the food was fresh and warm.

But those who initially accepted the invitation began to renege on their commitment. Perhaps Jesus is alluding to the fact that some people accept the invitation to God’s great banquet because it seems a good thing to do “down the road,” as it were. Who wouldn’t want to go to heaven when she/he dies? But Jesus says that the host/Father issues an invitation now that must be accepted now. His invitation allows no delay or postponement till after other commitments are met.

This is the way the rich young man wanted eternal life, as an additional commodity and not as a life commitment and immediate priority (Mk. 10:17-31). During the COVID shutdown, we became familiar with carry-out food service.

The Father doesn't offer his banquet of abundant and eternal life as something we can carry away with us and "cash in on" or activate when we've lived all our personal dreams, ambitions and priorities. The Father insists that we come in to his banquet hall, into a life-changing, priority-demanding relationship with him. The banquet of this abundant and eternal is free but not cheap.

When the second invitation, the "Come and get it!" invitation, was sent out the invited guests began to make excuses. Picture this scene of a wealthy and generous landowner who has prepared an elaborate banquet, only to be met with sudden refusals which left him with a prepared feast and no one to eat it. No one likes to be "stood up." Biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey notes that what each of these invited guests was saying in equally offensive and inexcusable ways was "Your banquet is not worth my personal interests and time." Each of us faces the choice of priorities vis-à-vis the call to follow Jesus and to enter his kingdom and enjoy his banquet.

Interestingly, none of these excuses centered on evil things. The field purchase was a matter of personal property and we know we are to be careful stewards and managers of our wealth. The oxen were important to this individual's work and business, and all of us want to be good providers for our families and even be able to contribute financially to the kingdom of God. Marriage, we all know, is an important calling and responsibility. But all of these enterprises and responsibilities can become idols and excuses that keep us from following Jesus and seeking God first and his kingdom (Matt. 6:33).

Although the shunned host is angry over these refusals, he's not obsessed with rage and condemnation to which he would certainly have been entitled. Instead, he issues an expanded invitation to reach out to other potential guests. Jesus' Good News of salvation indeed was preached and offered first to the house of Israel, the people of the Old Covenant. But their refusal would mean the fulfillment of Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies about a New Covenant that would include the Gentiles, As John writes in the prologue of his gospel, "*He (The Word, Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him*" (Jn.1:11). There would be the New Israel, the new people of God, who would receive him and receive "the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:12).

The host in the parable was a wealthy man who had invited his privileged guests, who subsequently refused his invitation. Now he turns to the poor, crippled, blind and lame and extends his invitation to them. These broken and neglected people were ostracized from temple worship and considered unclean. This host, however, considers them worthy of his banquet. And Jesus had announced this "great reversal" of the kingdom of God. Outsiders would be welcomed by God (Lk. 4:18). The broken are the ones most likely to realize their need for God.

How easily the broken people can be overlooked and omitted even in the very religion that supposedly worships God! That was true in first century Judaism and

it's true in the church today. How easily power, control and privilege is seized by those wanting to have their way and influence in the church, which is totally at odds with the spirit of Jesus, which is the spirit of servanthood and humility. But the Host is seeking, not the mighty and influential, but rather the weak and lowly, and if the church omits and overlooks these we are betraying the Host of the banquet, who seeks them out.

The reputation of the host in our parable would have been totally "ruined" by his inviting these "riffraff" to his banquet. He violated all proper social convention to go beneath his status in society. And this is a fitting picture of the God of our Lord Jesus, who stooped to the lowest level to reach us sinners. Jesus the eternal Son laid aside his glory and took the way of suffering and death on a shameful cross in order to rescue us (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus was insulted as a friend of sinners, who "ruined his reputation" in order to rescue us lost sinners (Lk. 15:1-2). And the only way we can be rescued is by the shameful cross on which Jesus died. And we're called to share his reproach in joining him at his banquet table. You're likely to "ruin" your reputation with your friends, family and colleagues who think of the Christian life as one for weaklings and social misfits. But the invitation comes from the God who seeks after the "riffraff" and whose Son died as the ultimate "riffraff" on a scandalous cross and calls us to follow him in the way of the cross.

And there are the outsiders, those who have yet to hear the Good News, the news that there indeed is a banquet and that they are welcome to the salvation feast of God. Our responsibility to be God's messengers and invitation-givers is to accept our missional responsibility to reach those God has placed in our personal sphere of influence. (Today, Matt and Jamie will acknowledge their responsibility to "set the table of God's saving grace for their son Theo, who'll be baptized today.)

The God of perfect love will not force anyone to accept his love, which would not be love at all. He woos us by his grace and compelling invitation. Paul speaks of how the love of Christ constrains us (2 Cor. 5:14). In this Near Eastern culture first you would say, "Oh, no. I'm afraid you can't mean to invite me." And then the host or his servant/messenger would continue to insist for about 15 minutes, with your replies, "Oh, surely not me. You must be mistaken." And finally, when this back and forth was over, you would say, "OK, since you insist." The messenger would be instructed by the host to not take "no" for an answer. This is what "compel" means. The messenger would have his arm around you and as you are saying, "No, certainly not me. This is too good to be true," he is gently guiding you to the host's banquet.

In the same way, God seeks to draw us lovingly to faith. This is the convincing of the Holy Spirit Jesus speaks about (Jn. 16:8-11) and the imploring Paul mentions (2 Cor. 5:20). God honors us with free will and does not force his love upon us or force us to love him. And there ought to be this sense of humility and

unworthiness before the amazing grace of God that causes us to say, "This is too good to be true." And there is no mechanical predestination in this parable, but it does show that God must do the inviting. He always takes the initiative. But we must do the accepting. We cannot save ourselves but we can certainly condemn ourselves by our refusal of grace.

The Host has sent out his invitation to all. Many are called but few are chosen (Matt. 22:14). All have received or will receive this invitation to know God and to be part of his banqueting table of love, forgiveness, joy, peace and everlasting purpose. We will either be compelled by his love or condemned by our own refusal. And your refusal may not be a flagrant "in your face" defiance, but more an excuse, a strategy of delay until your priorities are accomplished and the banquet of God is more convenient to you. But time eventually runs out for all of us, and sooner or later the last invitation and final opportunity has come and gone. One of the last verses in the Bible is "Whoever is thirsty, let him come" (Rev. 22:17).

To me it is a matter of incredible, amazing grace that the Father, the great Host, should want us, in the words of Henri Nouwen, to "sit at his side at the heavenly banquet." As Nouwen articulates so beautifully in his interpretation of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, the banquet host is none other than the Father of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother, who yearns for both of them to come into the fullness of his loving presence. God the Host invites us, says Nouwen, to the celebration that belongs to the kingdom of God, who offers forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. God wants to share his joy with us forever, a joy that we strangely resist, with our preoccupation with lesser things.

"Come, for everything is now ready" and "there is still room."