

Let Me Tell You a Story Sermon Series  
The Wedding Banquet - Luke 14:15-24  
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This text will always hold a peculiarly special place in my heart. At my church in Chicago, I preached on it one Sunday, emphasizing the importance of inviting the poor and the lame to our tables to share a meal. That next week, I received three invites to dinner from congregation members. I'm still trying to figure out whether they thought I was poor or my sermons were lame.

There are a lot of images of God in the Bible, which can make it really difficult to figure out who God is for us. There's God as a stern judge, God as our loving parent, God as a creator, God as a rock and fortress, God as a shepherd. Which one speaks to you probably depends on where you are in life and what challenges you are facing.

The church where I served as a student minister in seminary had a particular view of God that was represented in the design of their sanctuary. The church, which is in Columbus, Ind., featured a sanctuary with all dark wood, no sound system, uncomfortable pews, and no windows. The architect believed that worshipping God should be an austere experience free of trivial distractions like sunlight and joy. The word "austere" means strict or severe, which tells you what the architect thought about God. God was not so much a parent to be loved as a ruler to be feared.

Our parable today presents an image of God that is the polar opposite of that one and is a way of relating to God that I believe doesn't get near enough attention: God as a party-giver. Isn't that awesome? Imagine God has someone who gives lavish, extravagant parties and invites us to attend. God is the hospitable socialite, throwing open the doors of God's house and encouraging people to come and join the party. But not everyone accepts the invitation.

Jesus tells this parable while at a dinner party thrown by a prominent Pharisee. He sees how everyone is jockeying for position to sit in the seats closest to the hosts, which are the seats of honor, so Jesus gives a lesson on humility and the importance of a radical hospitality that encompasses those lower than you on the social ladder. He concludes by saying that, if you do this, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

This prompts one of the dinner guests to say, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" There's one in every group, right? The brown-noser. The teacher's pet. The person constantly sucking up to the host. This person makes the assumption that he and the other guests are included in that group of people who are blessed and will be in God's kingdom. You can almost hear all the Pharisees say in response, "Oh yes, aren't we the lucky ones! Bless us!" and then giving snooty little laughs and clinking their champagne glasses together.

But Jesus is having none of it, because he knows that the ones who are attending this dinner party are the ones who are rejecting the invitation to God's dinner party. So, he tells this parable about a man who gave a great dinner party and invited many people. Back then, it was hard to invite people to parties because cell phone reception was really poor and people rarely checked their email. So, to invite someone to your house for a party took two steps. The first step was to say to them, "Hey, I'm going to have a party in the next few weeks and you're invited." It was like a save-the-date postcard. The second step was to go back to those people the day of the party and say, "OK! I've fired up the grill and the corn pudding is in the oven. The feast is ready. C'mon over."

Ostensibly, the invitees in our parable accepted the first invitation, and are now being issued the second one: “Come, for everything is ready now.” But in between the first invitation and the second one, something more pressing has come up. The first two just made purchases – one bought some land, another some oxen – and they have to go inspect their purchases, so they send their regrets.

Ok. Seriously? First of all, couldn’t the person wait until the next day to inspect the land? It’s not like it was going to move. “Hey, where’s my land? I thought it was supposed to be here.” Second of all, who buys oxen without seeing them first? That would be like me calling Leigh and saying, “Guess what? I just bought a car.” And she would say, “Oh, really? Tell me about it.” “Well, I bought it over the phone, so I have no idea what kind it is, how old it is, how much mileage it has what color it is, or if it has four tires and steering wheel. But I got a great deal on it!”

And how about this third guy? He says, “I have just been married and therefore I cannot come.” So, you’re telling me that a few weeks ago, when the first invitation was sent out, this guy didn’t know he was going to get married? He just woke up one day and decided, “You know, today would be a good day to be betrothed.” No! That’s not how it works. You don’t accept an invitation and then turn it down. That’s not only rude, it wastes the time and resources of the host.

This isn’t about fields or oxen or marriage. This is about making excuses. This is about mixing up priorities. Could the guests have attended the party? Of course they could have. But, for whatever reason, they didn’t want to do so. We’ve all had those occasions, right? You accept an invite in the spur of the moment, only to realize you really, really don’t want to go. So, you secretly pray something will happen that will provide you a convenient excuse not to go. “I have to back out of our lunch date, I completely forgot I’m getting married that day!” I actually read online that a man called canceled on a lunch date with the excuse: “I’m sorry I can’t make it to lunch. Grandma tried to poison me. Again.” I really want to know more about that story!

As you might guess, this parable is about more than a dinner party and the Pharisees would have gotten Jesus’ message. God, the gracious party giver, had extended the first invitation to the Israelites through Moses, invited them to join God on a journey of faith. Moses prophesied that another one greater than him was to come, the second invitation letting the Israelites know the feast was ready. Jesus is that second invitation, the call to come to God’s table and share in the meal God has prepared. But many people, including the Pharisees, were declining the invitation.

So, Jesus says to the Pharisees, if you don’t want to party with me, I’m going to find some people who do. That’s why Jesus spends time with the lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the outcasts. The Pharisees ridicule Jesus for spending time with such low-lives, when it’s the Pharisees who have mixed up their priorities and rejected the invitation God has sent them. They are more focused on keeping things austere than they are in enjoying the party God is throwing for them.

In the parable, the servant follows the master’s order, bringing in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. And did catch what happens next? The servant says, “Master, I went out and got everyone you asked me to get...and there’s still room!” How big is this party, anyway? Society was filled with people who didn’t fit in, who didn’t belong, whose physical or mental ailments kept them from being invited to anything. That’s why the master says, “Go out in the roads and lanes and compel people to come in.” They had to be compelled to come to the party,

because parties at the master's house were not something to which they got invited. They weren't worthy of being guests at such a lavish party.

But here's the difference between them and the original guests: they came. They didn't have fields and oxen to distract them. They didn't have to make up excuses. They were simply thrilled to be invited at all. Does that invitation hold the same importance for us? Are we like the poor and the lame, honored to be invited to such a gathering? Or are we more like the Pharisees, looking for any good reason to opt out? Each week, we're invited to come to worship, to sing and celebrate, to share in good fellowship and a meal, to reap once again God's blessings for us, to see God at work around you and to join in that work. How often do we reject that invitation?

I know, we have legitimate reasons for our rejection. We have to work, we have a family, we have financial needs that need to be met. I get it, I'm right there with you. We want to be more faithful in our participation, we want to do a better job growing our faith, we know that there are ways we can use our gifts to serve others. But there's that field I bought. There are those oxen to be inspected. Grandma may try to poison us!

I read this week that excuses are a form of self-idolatry, because they put ourselves before God. Ouch. Anyone else guilty of that? I know that not even the most faithful among us always accept God's invitation to worship, to learn, to serve. That's why you need to know today that this invitation isn't going to go away. You're not going to make God love you less by not accepting it. There's a persistent stubbornness to God's loving that makes this invitation open-ended.

But there are a couple things you need to know. First, the only way you won't get to go to the party is if you choose not to go. No one remains outside the party except by their own choice? God isn't going to check your references for worthiness. Your life is the party God decided to throw for you so you could enjoy God's blessings, and you are invited. You don't need to get all dressed up for it. It's a come-as-you-are party. Actually, it's more like a be-who-you-are party. If you're tired, come to the party. If you're frazzled, come to the party. If you have serious doubts about your faith, come to the party. If you're worried you're not good enough, come to the party. There's plenty of room.

Second – and this one might be a deal-breaker for you - if you accept the invitation to join God's party, you might not like the other people on the guest list: the poor, the lame, the people on the other side of the political spectrum, the people who don't use correct punctuation, the people who talk loudly on their cell phones in public places, the people you'd rather not spend any time with. Remember, this is an open invitation. You are invited. So is everyone else. If you want to be part of what Jesus is doing in this world, these are the people you might be hanging out with, people who don't have voice, people who don't have a place at the tables of power of privilege, people who define a blessing as having enough food for the day. Are you willing to spend some time with them? Because that's where God is partying.

The invitation has been offered. The table has been set. The host is eagerly awaiting our response. Will you come? There's so much going on. Life is so busy! Will you come? Sunday is my only morning to sleep in. The kids' schedules are chaotic. Will you come? I didn't like Kory's sermon last week. What if we sing that one really slow song. Will you come? I'm not sure I even believe this stuff anymore. Will you come? I only have a little to give. It probably won't make a difference. Will you come? The table is set. The invitation is offered each and every week. God's love is stubbornly persistent that way. God wants you to join the party. Will you come?