

“It’s a Party!”

Tell Me the Stories – part #3

Luke 14:15-24

Have you ever received an invitation to a party? Maybe a birthday party or a more formal occasion, like a wedding reception. My wife and I once received an invitation to a Christmas Party in Marshall, and I was surprised and nervous about it. It was a black-tie affair, and we were new in town and wanted make a good impression. I got out my tuxedo – yes, I do actually own one – and I got a haircut. I wanted to look my best. Trouble was, the barber only knew one style of haircut – the military shave. I’m not sure what impression my nearly-bald head gave others, but we did have a good time.

Here’s the thing, though. I’m not really one for fancy parties. At that black-tie dinner, I felt a little awkward, uncertain if I belonged there. The truth is, I like smaller, simpler affairs. Who am I to get invited to a big bash?

There are two ways to look at an invitation. 1.) Like you earned it and expected it, or 2.) In humility and surprise that someone would care enough to bring you in. Your attitude can make a huge difference in how much you appreciate the invitation and enjoy the party.

And that’s just if you are a guest. What if you are the party planner? What is it like to organize a big party, put in all that money and effort, and yet, no one shows up? Are there any cooks out there? How do you feel when you prepare a big meal, and people refuse to eat it? It’s disappointing, to say the least.

We attend parties, we throw parties. Eating is a universal action, which is why Jesus used the common image of a formal dinner to illustrate a deeper truth

about God's kingdom and those whom are invited to feast at the heavenly banquet. Let's start by looking at the background of this parable.

Jesus ate a lot of dinners in Luke. It's a good thing that he walked everywhere, because I'm sure he consumed a lot of calories! Jesus ate at the homes of tax collectors, homes of women, homes of the poor and rich. In fact, in this passage, Jesus was eating at the home of a prominent Pharisee. However, even a cursory reading of the Gospels tells us that Jesus's heart was always for the poor. Jesus was clear in his teaching: humility is valued highly in God's kingdom. Listen to Jesus' words just prior to telling today's story.

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Humility. Caring for the poor. These are the most valuable actions in God's kingdom. I can agree with that. Would you?

Now, just when this dinner party is rolling, someone in the room says, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God!" That's a nice soundbite. Jesus doesn't deny it. But it seems that the party-goers still don't get the truth about God's kingdom, which means, it's time for another parable, so that Jesus can teach us all about who really eats at this glorious meal.

The parable goes like this: a man threw a big dinner party and invited all his friends, not once, but twice. He used a kind of RSVP system: #1 - This is the date. #2 - This is the time; literally, the food is ready. They didn't have wrist watches or

smart phones back then. So when the meal was actually ready, the host had to send out his servant to collect his guests. Actually, I think that was even more impressive than a simple invitation. You can tell that this dinner party was a big deal.

But something weird starts happening. His guests - his "friends" - suddenly all have cold feet. After initially saying yes, they begin to make excuses to the servant who came for them.

They say things like, "I just bought some land, and I was going to check it out. Sorry, please accept my condolences." Or, "I just bought some oxen, and I need to break them in. This really can't wait. I'm sorry, I'll make it to the next one." Or "I just got back from our honeymoon, and my wife is so tired, I really can't expect her to go with me. I don't really want to go by myself, so, we'll just stay home and rest." (My paraphrase, of course)

These excuses are so lame. Really? Who buys land without seeing it first? The land will be there after the party. Same for the oxen. And ladies, if your husband refused to take you to a fancy party, he'd be sleeping on the couch, am I right?

Remember, this was no ordinary banquet. This is like a feast in heaven with God! Who would really stay home?

One interpretation of this parable is that those who think they are in God's kingdom really are not, as revealed by their actions. It's so easy to put off the invitation of the gospel. "Hey, I don't need to worry about that stuff until I die." "The Bible? Why should I read that?" "It's such a nice day outside, I think I'll skip worship today." People walk away from God, ignoring the invitation from the

lover of our souls. And then there comes a day of reckoning, when we realize what we've missed.

It doesn't have to be that way. Instead, we can have the attitude of the people who were invited to the party. Look at this list (verse 21) – these are not the high and mighty, nor the well-to-do, nor the rich and famous. They are poor, crippled, blind, and lame. They are smelly. They dress funny. Talk funny. Don't have the right connections, don't know the right people.

Church, listen up! This is who we really are. We don't deserve to be guests at God's table, yet he has sought us out. Look again at verse 23. "Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full." Granted, God does not force the gospel upon anyone. But it is a mistake if we think we deserve God's love or are entitled to God's grace. Our salvation is not based on our self-righteousness or reputation. Do you know what the gospel really is? One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

I would say that even in the church today we don't know how good God's grace really is. The invitation to God's kingdom extends to those we least expect; ourselves included. We don't belong here, but we are here.

So far, we have looked at this parable from the perspective of the guests. But there is a second layer of meaning, if you look from the perspective of the host. What drives a rich person to risk social status, lavishly spend money on a feast, and then invite the poorest of the poor to enjoy it?

There is only one answer to that question: compassion. If you read the Gospels, and especially Luke, you find that the poor have a special place in God's kingdom. What is the first Beatitude? "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20; see also Matthew 5:3). Read James 2:5: "Has

not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?" And check out 1 Samuel 2:7-8: "The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor."

Need I say more? There is something about the poor brings them closer to the kingdom, the gospel, to God's own heart. Possibly it is because they do not take anything for granted. Maybe they have more humility. Maybe they are more content with what they have. Maybe all of the above. The point is, these people did not reject the invitation to the banquet.

What can we say about those who did refuse to come? Did they think they deserved to be invited again? That the host would beg them to come to the party? I can just picture one of them saying, "O, DAHLING, I just simply CAHN'T go! I've nothing to wear!"

Remember, Jesus told this parable in front of the prominent Jewish leaders (verse 3) the Pharisees and experts in God's law. These were not the "bad" guys. They are the religious ones. They did expect to eat at God's table. So what gives?

They, like many of us, had forgotten that God's invitation is not something one earns. And many of those you would expect to find righteous before God are not – they are only self-righteous. That is the story of God's kingdom. We don't deserve to be here. Ironically, it is only those who realize this truth who do enjoy the banquet.

Tenth Avenue North wrote a song called "Control," and the lyrics illuminate this point perfectly.

God You don't need me, but somehow You want me

Oh how You love me, somehow that frees me

To take my hands off of my life and the way it should go

God doesn't need us; God wants us. The gospel must continue to surprise us, entice us, and overwhelm us. We are the beggars, the blind, the lame, the miserable, the poor, the wretched. None of us are anything compared to God. Yet, in his unfathomable love and mercy, we are forgiven, invited to the table. What kind of God does that?

Our God does. God welcomes the ones who least expect it but who are the most grateful. Like a woman so wracked by her sin, she cries over Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. (Luke 7:36-50) Like a criminal dying on a cross, who admits his guilt. (Luke 23:39-43) Like the lepers, the untouchables, the foreigners, the outcast and the broken, those who would never hope, never dream about being invited to anyone's home, much less Jesus' eternal home.

How grateful are you that God has invited you to his heavenly banquet? How grateful are you that he has sent his son to die for you? Let me give you four concluding questions to ask yourself.

1. "What kind of a guest am I?" Which character in this parable do you most resemble? Proud and haughty, or humble and grateful?
2. "Have I rejected God?" If you've rejected God, the offer to the table still stands, but eventually, there will come a time when it is no longer possible to accept it.
3. "Do I think God has rejected me?" If you think God has rejected you, look at the way God invites the poor, lame, blind, etc. That's all of us! We don't deserve to be here! You are invited. Will you say yes to Jesus?

4. "Am I willing to invite, urge, and compel others to come to God's table?"

The servant was the one who extended the invitation. If you call yourself a servant of God, go out and invite! Urge, compel others to come.

God invites the ones who least expect to be part of his radical, world upsetting kingdom, and it is marvelous. How fitting that today we celebrate Holy Communion together. This is a powerful example of how God, and God alone, invites us to the table of forgiveness. Let us pray.

Please join me in singing our hymn before we join together in the prayer of confession.

Memory Verse: Luke 14:23

"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.'"

Thoughts for reflection:

- When were you invited to a party unexpectedly? How did it feel?
- When have you offered an invitation that was turned down? How did you feel?
- In what ways is God's kingdom like a banquet? In what ways is it not?
- Do you agree that the church sometimes falls prey to a sense of entitlement? Why?
- Have you accepted Jesus' offer to the heavenly banquet by confessing your sin, asking his forgiveness, and committing your way to the Lord?
- How do your actions show your gratefulness for being invited to God's table?