

Sermon preached July 3, 2011
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St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Duncan

The Invitation

Luke 14: 15-24
Revelation 19: 1-9

There was a message on my answering machine at home the other day. It was a woman's voice speaking. She first of all gave her name, then introduced herself as the daughter of folk who are part of our congregation. She then proceeded to extend an invitation to join with the extended family and circle of friends to celebrate what would be a significant anniversary for this couple. She said that as soon as the postal strike was over and the mail was running once again, she would send a written invitation, but she wanted us to have the date marked in our calendars as soon as possible, because our presence at the party would be so meaningful to her parents.

The next day, another message sounded on the answering machine, again with an invitation. This time the caller was a dear lady, May Allen, who is herself now 101 years young. May was a member in my former congregation in Chilliwack, and she wanted me to know that the church was celebrating its anniversary with a sort of home-coming event and she was so hoping that we might be on holidays and would be able to attend. It would, she said, be such a surprise and blessing to have us there.

Two invitations in two days, and in both cases, the folks doing the inviting were so genuinely sincere in asking us to join with them in these special events. It was humbling, because their insistence on how meaningful our presence would be was as if to say that the party just would not be everything it could be if we weren't there.

Now, I tell you this not to suggest how sought-after as guests we are. Rather, that experience does remind me of this truth: that God yearns after us with that same longing, insistent urgency, that his party, God's gala in the kingdom of heaven, just won't be the same if his people refuse his grace-laden invitation to come and share his table and enter his joy.

It's fascinating to read the gospels and take note of how often the theme of party and celebration and feast arises. There are several reasons for that. First of all, life happens at table, doesn't it? Where does the family gather? Where do friends more often than not meet? Is it not over a meal, where we break bread together and rejoice in each other's presence and do life together? Certainly, in scripture, covenants were made and sealed with a sacrifice and a meal, and one of the key symbols of the coming kingdom was that of the messianic banquet.

Jesus often employed the image of the feast for the presence of the kingdom. In fact, that image of the party is especially prominent throughout the gospel of Luke chapters 14 and 15. Chapter 15, of course, is all about grand, crazy with joy celebrations, because of a lost coin found, a lost sheep recovered, and most of all, a dead son come back to life. What connects the last of those three parables with the parable of the great banquet is the matter of invitations being spurned, whether by the guests who would not come or the elder son who would not enter the feast.

Chapter 14 opens with Jesus at a dinner party in the home of a high ranking Pharisee; only no dinner party was safe from the outrageous and the wonderful when Jesus was around. No sooner had he arrived, and with every critical, suspicious eye upon him, Jesus posed the defiant question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" Everyone knew the religiously correct answer that it was not, but none ventured the assertion. When no answer was offered, Jesus promptly took hold of a man who was there who suffered with dropsy and promptly healed him on the spot. Then the Lord began to chastise the dinner guests asking whether, if they had a son or an ox that fell into a well on the Sabbath day, would they not immediately seek to rescue him? It was as if Jesus was asking how could the party ever really rock when someone was in desperate need of healing? Where Jesus is, the kingdom is, and where the kingdom is, there is joy, and the dominating presence of sorrow and suffering must be thrown back.

Jesus not only knew how to bring joy to a party, but also how to guarantee he would never get a return invitation, for he then went on to criticize the Pharisee's guests for how they loved to jostle with each other to get the most important places of honour at the table. His command that they should take the least important place was no trivial instruction in social etiquette; rather it was pointing to the truth that welcome and invitation within the kingdom of heaven belongs, not to those who demand it or think they deserve it, but who in humility receive that welcome as the amazing gift of grace it is.

And if that was not enough of a tweak to the self-righteous noses of the Pharisees, his next party planning advice about inviting the poor, the lame, the crippled and blind must have caused a small riot. G. B. Caird in his commentary, notes that *it is a human characteristic to cultivate the society only of one's own kind, but that the Pharisees had elevated this into a spiritual principle, refusing all social contact with any who did not share their standard of piety. But whatever earthly satisfaction they may have derived from their mutual benefit society, they missed the heavenly blessedness that comes to those who show hospitality and kindness where there is no possibility of recompense.* Remember, the poor, lame, crippled and blind were not simply the low down social class that were to be avoided because, well, they were so low. The poor, lame, crippled and blind were viewed as despised by God. Their infirmities and suffering were judged by the Pharisees as the self-evident result of their sinfulness and consequent punishment from God. They were not just low down wretches who might be tempted to swipe the silverware or would get the carpets dirty; they were seen as the damned and the outcast to be avoided lest their evil contaminate the Pharisee's holiness. One of our great sins as humans is to believe we enhance our piety and purity by who we avoid, exclude and reject; in contrast to Jesus who often seemed happier to eat with tax collectors and sinners than with the religious elite – maybe because the "sinners" were so filled with awe and delight of being in Jesus' presence that they let loose and laughed and partied and wept with joy while the Pharisees were so filled with their own self-satisfaction that there was no room for gladness, wonder or gratitude.

What Jesus was most definitely not saying when he advised those dinner guests to invite the poor, blind, crippled and lame was that by keeping company with such losers and low-accounts, they might earn extra brownie points for entry into the kingdom. Jesus was not giving tips about the importance of noble good deeds as a means to an end.

What Jesus was especially rejected was the idea that blessedness had anything to do with polishing up the accolades of how important we are, or what achievements, position or

prestige we have managed to accumulate. In fact, all the meticulous self-important bookkeeping and religious record keeping on our virtues and other's sinfulness and unworthiness is declared to be all so much rot in the kingdom of heaven.

Because as the parable of the great banquet which Jesus then went on to relate so wonderfully demonstrates, the honoured guests at the kingdom's banquet will be those who find themselves at table through no achievement of their own whatsoever. Rather it is only and completely through the unmerited, outlandish grace of the master who is unshakably determined that his banquet house will be filled.

Now, let me make a very strong assertion against what has often been a too simplistic allegorical explanation of the parable. The traditional explanation is that the original guests of the parable represent the respectable, law-abiding Jewish leaders who turn a deaf ear to Jesus' words and invitation, and who are more trusting and confident in their own religious systems and doctrines than in the mercy of God. Traditional explanations will say that the beggars of the city streets and alleys are the spiritual waifs of the Jewish people, the tax gatherers and sinners whom the Pharisees looked down upon with contempt. Finally, the vagrants of the far roads and country lanes are the Gentiles and all the outsiders to Jewish faith which, by the wide-spread and inclusive grace of God, find themselves drawn into the feast and celebration of the kingdom.

Now, that interpretation is not wrong, *per se*; it can be too easily reduced to an anti-Semitic equation: Jews are out; Gentiles are in. No, those who are out are the folk who thought they were in by virtue of what they had themselves achieved; the folk who presumed they had a Free Pass with no expiry date. Just show up and the red carpet would be rolled out. Those who are out, according to the parable, are any and all of us if we think our place at the banquet can be deserved, earned or achieved, or worse, that it is reserved for we, who know we are the good people, the a-list, as over against those who we know are the not-deserving folk, whose names would never go on any invitation list that we had anything to do with.

Instead, the parable asserts that those who end up being in, who find themselves miraculously at the banquet table drawn in from the streets and alleys, the roads and country lanes, are once again none other than the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame – the so-called damned and outcast, the unacceptable and untouchable and unpardonable.

By the way, we need not get all caught up in trying to interpret the excuses of the original invited guests and then moralizing about letting ourselves be overwhelmed with the worries of the world or being duped by choosing the merely good instead of the very best. The issue, as Robert Capon puts it, is not the legitimacy of the excuse – God, he reminds us, *will be as furious over legitimate excuses as he would be over phoney ones, since in either case the net result is the same: we keep ourselves out of reach of his gracious action.*

And that seems to be the central dividing point always: grace belongs to those who are so down and out, helpless and unable to save themselves and know it and while remaining forever utterly amazed and overwhelmed at the miracle of the love that has seized hold of them, react with the only response that ever matters – they simply are ready to receive, to shout hallelujah and belly up to the banquet with awe and appetite and rejoicing!

Grace ends up being, not so much withdrawn or revoked, as it is most certainly refused and rejected, when we act as if God can just be put on hold while we busy ourselves with our own worries and wants, our own expectations of what we deserve or what we believe someone else doesn't. Grace is rejected and the party of God's joy is refused when we think God

ought to check with us and get our opinion about who should receive the invitation to his love and who should be refused, or that we should have a say about the seating arrangements. Grace is forfeited whenever we forget that we are always undeserving of the majestic mercy and lavish love of God given in Jesus Christ. Yet here is the unbelievable good news: despite our undeserving and in contrast to all that we do deserve because of our sinfulness and silliness and unsaintliness, God nevertheless has decided that we are to be guests of honour, brought in and carried in by nothing less than the grace of heaven.

This is a week in which Prince William and Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, are touring Canada. They wowed the crowds in Ottawa on Canada Day, and no doubt the royal visit will be the focus of headlines for the coming days. Imagine, for a moment, that in tomorrow's mail you received an embossed invitation to a gala in the presence of the future king, and hand-written in the corner was a note: Dear George, Dear Jean, Dear Lorna, please come. The party just won't be the same without you.

We are invited to a gala feast with the King of Kings. The invitation was embossed with the lacerations and wounds of his scourging, beating, crucifixion and death, for your sake and mine. We did not, cannot, will never deserve that he should have died for us. The invitation is his welcome to no accounts and low accounts like you and me, people who will never trust enough, love enough, surrender enough, obey enough or give enough to deserve being called royalty, yet we are, through his saving mercy, through his blood poured out for us, and through his gracious decision to claim us as his own beloved friends and most desired guests. The Master of the feast bids us come, in all our lameness and poverty, all our brokenness and blindness, and join the feast of his love. And against all imagining, our Saviour has said that the party will really not be the same without us.