

RSVP

Luke 14:15-24
Preached July 5, 2009
by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' 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.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 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.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' 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. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" (Luke 14:15-24)

Introduction. What if you gave a party and invited many people but no one came?

Through the years Patty and I have hosted (actually she did most of the hosting) small group gatherings at our home. Nearly every evening before those events both of us would wonder if anyone would come. We do not live in the most convenient neighborhood and are hard to find. Generally we get somewhat anxious when the start time draws near and we look out the windows and go to the door, hoping someone will come. When we throw a party, we want people to come to our

home because we enjoy having people with us.

Here in Luke, Jesus tells a wonderful parable of man who threw a party. The Master uses the story to convey some rather powerful messages regarding God's nature, his kingdom and our responsibility.

The context.

Nearly all of Jesus' parables arose out of a particular context in which he wanted to communicate some significant points to his audience. Often he wanted them to overhear the message in a somewhat indirect form. As the audience would think about the story, they would eventually have an "aha" moment. Let's look at the context for this parable.

One Sabbath after church (synagogue), Jesus was invited to a dinner at the home of a religious leader. During the dinner, Jesus observed how the guests at the banquet jockeyed for places of honor at the table. Who would be seated at the head table? Who would be seated nearest to the head of the table and the honored guest?

Jesus used that situation as a teaching moment. He said to the gathering that when any attend a banquet, it is better to take the lowest seat possible so that when the host notices where the person is, he move her to a more honored position. He said that was much better than taking a high place only to be displaced when a person who has higher rank comes and is given the seat.

Then Jesus gave some instructions about throwing parties. He suggested it was better not to invite family, friends and those with resources to one's banquet who could reciprocate by throwing another party. Instead, it was better to invite the destitute, the crippled, the lame and the blind because they could not repay. That would be truly a generous act. He then promised that such action would be repaid at the resurrection.

Jesus' words provided his audience with the proper kingdom etiquette for being either a guest or a host of a banquet. His perspective caused the

people to think differently about parties.

It was out of this context that one of the guests at the dinner made what he perceived to be a deeply religious and meaningful statement: *Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.* This man had in mind a great eschatological meal that is the one to take place in the end when God fully establishes his kingdom.

It is out of the context of the dinner and this comment that Jesus told the parable.

Layers of Meaning.

A man decides to throw a "mega feast." So he does what nearly anyone who throws a party would do, he sends out invitations. True to his culture, he did not tell his prospective guests the exact day or time. When all the preparations were complete and it was time to serve the food, he would then let those who had been invited know that "dinner is served."

This parable like many others was a wonderful medium of communication because it spoke on multiple levels.

As listeners then and now heard and hear this story, they quickly understand that the one who gives the "mega feast" is God. This is story about the kingdom and who God invites to take part in its benefits and people response to God's invitation.

The idea of the banquet meal in the kingdom of God is both future and present. Out of the context of the guest's comment about eating bread in the kingdom, hearers are transported by an idea that was held by the Jews of Jesus' day and many Christians throughout history. There is a great eschatological meal prepared for God's people. Listen to these words from Revelation 19:9: *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."* It is the idea that in the end God will gather his people for a great banquet to celebrate his triumph over evil and the complete union with his people. (It will be a meal where the calories do not count.)

A few decades after Christ's earthly ministry, the Christian community who

read Luke's presentation of this story would have thought of another type of great banquet meal. For them the kingdom was not just a future utopia but also a present reality. They came to know that they could participate in the kingdom in the present age.

For the ancient and the present Christian community, there is the present gathering around the table for God's great banquet. This table tells us of God's most gracious act in Jesus Christ. He calls us to this table to participate in that act and to enjoy his presence. The invitation goes out from God for us to come. It is a meal that looks back at Christ's work and into the future at the great banquet of God to come.

Through the years, I have heard various people talk about Communion Sundays being a time when fewer people attend church. I have found that to be strange because this is a great day. Truly attendance should be higher if we fully understood the significance of this event. It is a time when we are invited by God to a great banquet. Something special and unique happens here.

As a church community, the invitation to come to the banquet is not limited to communion Sunday. In a real sense, every Sunday our gathering for worship is a participation in the mega feast. Here we enjoy one another's presence, we honor our host who is God and we break the bread of his Word together.

Well, no party is complete unless it has guests. In the parable, two groups of people are invited to this table. Who were the people that were invited?

From the context of the parable, there are at least three levels of understanding as to who the intended guests were/are. First of all, we can interpret this rather literally. Invitations that went to those people who had resources and for whom life was good. (This group primarily snubbed the man's invitation.) The second invitation went out to those who were poor, homeless or had physical disabilities. Those without a voice, those who were hidden were invited to the feast. They were both city slickers and country bumpkins.

The second layer could be the religious and non-religious. Often it was the most religious in Jesus' day who snubbed him. They were slow to accept him and his message. Yet, those who were regarded as sinners often chose to follow him. The theme of Jesus' reaching out to sinners is strong in Luke. He came to save the lost.

The third layer could be Jews and Gentiles. The invitation first went out to the Jews. Unfortunately many rejected the invitation. John said it this way, *"He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God"* (1:11-12). Paul in Romans 1 says this: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (Romans 1:16).

While it is not possible to know entirely whom Jesus had in mind as he told the story, he clearly communicates that the invitation is an inclusive invitation. People from all walks of life are invited to the mega feast.

Why does God invite people from all walks of life to his party with him? This parable tells us that the host wanted his table to be full. He wanted people to enjoy the feast he had prepared. He wanted his guests to enjoy his generosity and he wanted to enjoy their fellowship. This is a picture of our God.

God wants the eschatological banquet table to be full. God wants this sanctuary to be full of people worshiping each week. He wants people to join in the party.

Nearly every Sunday morning to begin my day here, I come into this place and begin to pray for our worship and for you. I pray that God will fill these pews with people and fill each of us with his presence. I often see in my mind's eye this place being packed with worshipers at both services and the Vine being filled. I want this place each week to be filled. I firmly believe that is a God-thing.

Our place in the story.

As hearers of the story, where do we fit in?

First of all, we are people who are invited to God's banquet. God wants all, including each of us, to be guests at his mega feast – the great banquet to come and weekly celebrations of his people. How will we respond to his invitation?

Unfortunately, some do not accept the invitation. In this parable, we have three examples of people who refused to accept the invitation. The first two are purely lame by nature. One man said he had purchased land and had to go see it. Who would purchase property without first looking at it? The second said he had purchased oxen and needed to try them. The parallel today would be to purchase a car without test driving it. The third person said he had just gotten married. While that might sound like a better reason, the parable does not seem to excuse him.

You may have heard about the guy who was fishing on a Sunday morning. He and his fishing partner heard a church bell ringing in the distance. His buddy said, "Gee, today is Sunday. Shouldn't you be in church?" The fisherman said, "No. I couldn't go anyway because my wife is home sick."

Perhaps Jesus wanted to convey that most of our excuses of turning down God's invitation to God's weekly banquet and great banquet are weak. God wants us to attend his celebrations. In reality, most of us do what we set our hearts on doing.

Secondly, we who are Christ followers, play the role of the servant in the story. We deliver the invitation from God for people to attend this great banquet of worship and ultimate banquet. God has chosen his people to be the medium through which the invitation will be delivered. We are to be invitational people.

Like many of you, I long for this place to be filled with worshipers each week. Having meaningful and quality worship is important and many work hard to make that happen. We know we can always improve. We want this to be an experience people are drawn to attend. As important as that is the greater means we have to fill this place is through inviting people. If all of us would invite others until another came,

we would double our attendance. Soon this place would be filled. You know and/or encounter unchurched people who want to come to church and would come here if they were invited.

Invitation.

This morning, I want to extend an invitation and a challenge to each of you. First of all, you are invited to this mega feast. There is no banquet you can ever attend as important and meaningful as the one spread here. God is present at this table.

Secondly, invitation cards have been printed as a tool for you to invite at least two people to worship here at First-Centenary. You will be given two cards. I am asking you to think of two people you can invite – family member, neighbor, your nurse or doctor, cashier at Wal-Mart or parking garage, etc. Take time to invite someone to share the celebration that takes place here each Sunday.