

"Come-on, Let's Party"
Luke 14:1, 7-24
George Ronn, Guest Preacher
Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
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Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

I'm going to start off with a confession here this morning. Part of today's reading from Luke talks about the parable of the Great dinner, or in some translations, the Great banquet. And every time I read this section of Luke, I always think back to Lynn's Grandmother. When we lived on the East Coast we used to drive down to Florida to visit her family fairly regularly, and invariably Lynn's Grandmother would have us over for dinner. She always made these amazing Hungarian meals and of course she would make food for 10 even though it was just 5 or 6 of us at the table. She would stuff you til you couldn't eat another morsel, then she'd look right at you and say, "you didn't like it." You'd proclaim it was delicious and you were stuffed, but she would say, "No, you didn't like it! There's food left on the table, so that tells me you didn't like it." It didn't matter how much we praised the meal while eating, she'd insist we didn't like it. Then we'd all have to say how we couldn't eat another bite, how she should enjoy it for lunch the next day, etc. Of course she was just teasing, but I tell you this, if you left her home hungry, it was your own fault.

In today's reading from Luke, we learn about humility and hospitality.

In the first section, Jesus has been invited for Sabbath dinner to the home of a prominent Pharisee. The house is filled with the Pharisee's socially prominent guests who are all experts in the Law. Here we learn about being humble when invited to a banquet. Jesus tells us not to take the place of honor before it is offered, because we may end up disgraced if we are asked to take a less important seat in the room.

This is a valuable lesson, even today. Just a few weeks ago I, along with all the Senior Managers and Directors in our team, about 14 of us were invited to a Video Conference over at Corporate HQ in Eden Prairie. The meeting was to take place in the Executive Boardroom on the third floor, just outside the office of our CEO. As we arrived, some people took up the spaces at the table, while several of us took seats along the perimeter of the room.

About 1 minute before the video conference was to begin, in walks our Vice President and there are no seats at the table. He had to ask for a volunteer to give up their seat at the table and sit along the edge of the room. As someone volunteered and moved, and once our VP sat down, he further added to the uncomfortable situation by asking the person next to him to give up their seat and invited a person sitting along the edge of the room, the only person in the room who was not a member of the management team, to come and sit next to him. Ultimately he gave that person a performance award during the presentation. But this fully illustrates the point Jesus is trying to make in telling the story – I'm sure the two people involved were somewhat embarrassed to be asked to move – and it was fitting that a Project Manager was invited to sit at the table to receive acclamation from the team. I really wish I could have surveyed the group at the end of the meeting to ask how many people have read Luke, but of course that would not have been appropriate.

In the second part of the reading Jesus talks about hospitality. Invite those who can't repay you, Jesus says, for then you have an opportunity to receive a reward from God. Just inviting those of the same or higher social standing is its own reward. You have an opportunity to receive a blessing from God, he tells his host.

Beginning in verse 16, Jesus begins to tell them another story, another parable - A person gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now."

Now this might seem a bit out of the ordinary compared to how we invite guests today. We send out an invite, either written, or in email, or on the telephone – people RSVP, usually, and at the appointed hour they show up. In the First Century world the invitation was two-fold: (1) the initial invitation was issued some time ahead, and (2) the actual summons to the meal came when it is ready.

The first invitation was when you had the opportunity to decline. Once you had said YES, the host would plan the meal based on the number of attendees who'd said they were coming. With no way to preserve leftovers, once you'd said YES it was almost an obligation to attend; and to not attend when the servant came around to tell you all was ready was a grave

breach of social etiquette. So in verses 18-20 when the invited guest began making trivial excuses, this was tremendous personal insult to the host.

In a society where one's social standing was determined by peer approval, this was an act of social insult as well. And for all the guests to reject the final calling appears to be a conspiracy to discredit the host. As I read various commentaries on the subject on the internet, I read that Joel Green, a Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, characterized it this way: "In this instance, the socially elite of the host's community close ranks against him and shame him publicly. Whatever one makes of their excuses, their refusal to join the great dinner is a social strategy the effect of which is the defamation of the host."

And the excuses offered are pretty lame, right? Sorry, I just bought a new house and I need to inspect it. I can't come, I just bought a new car, and I need to test drive it. And the last is almost the worst when the respondent says, I just got married and cannot come. Well, when you RSVP'd, didn't you know then you were getting married?

Obviously the host is angry, if it were me I'd be livid – how could they possibly do this to me – but at the same time he's not going to let this spoil his party. 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

But the servant knows his boss, the host, and has anticipated his command. 'What you ordered has been done, but there is still room for more people.' Then the host told him, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'

I'm sure many of these people would have been very uncomfortable to be at the rich man's party. Which fork do I use? What is this tiny spoon for? Can I dip the carrot more than once into the sour cream dressing? Which glass is for the red wine?

Jesus ends the parable with this line: "I tell you, not one of those people who were originally invited will ever get a taste of my banquet." Obviously I am paraphrasing here, but it is easy to hear the anger of the host in those words. The host has been rejected, and is frustrated and hurt.

So, as Paul Harvey used to say, "Now, for the rest of the story."

Who are the players in this parable? Well, obviously the host is God the Father. He is inviting his people, Israel, to the messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God.

The rich and socially elite who reject the host's invitation at the last minute are the Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders who begin to plot against Jesus and eventually render the ultimate insult of having Jesus executed as a common criminal.

The poor and downtrodden are the common people, considered unclean by the Pharisees. And I believe further that those inside the town are the Jews, while those in the outlying areas are the Gentiles. Without further training in Seminary, I don't feel comfortable taking the allegory any further than that.

There are many themes within this parable. And when you think about them, you can link them to other portions of scripture.

Rejection and Insult: This parable is a bittersweet reminder of rejection, but also of mercy. We feel badly when we are rejected, but what about the Father? Think of his grief and broken heart. Think of his anger and mercy. Ponder on the verses at the beginning of John's Gospel that say this:

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, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11-13)

Lame excuses: I am sorry to say that in the lame excuses of the original guests, I hear some of my own lame and shallow excuses for not doing God's will. We may be able to convince ourselves that what we are doing is justified, but I am afraid that way too often our excuses are an insult to God. He is the Host and the Master of the house.

Mercy and Grace: Mercy and grace is another theme in this parable. Those who are not worthy to come to the host's table -- the poor, lame, crippled, blind -- are now invited. That is you and that is me. We are unworthy to eat at our Host's table, but we have been invited and cleansed.

How true it is when Luke quotes: 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'

Judgment and God's Plan: Those who reject the invitation -- for whatever reason -- will not taste of the Master's banquet. Contained within this very message are the seeds of judgment against those who deliberately reject the invitation from God.

For those who accept the invitation, the Host has prepared food for a large number of guests, and he won't be satisfied until his house is completely full. St. Peter said it well when he wrote: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9).

Throughout the Bible we see the themes of free will and predestination intertwined -- God's established purpose, our obedience to serve him, and the acceptance or rejection of the invitation by those who hear his word. How it all fits together God only knows. It may seem whimsical; but this parable is sobering and urgent too. May God use it to urge us all to thankfulness and obedience.

Let us pray: Father, in this parable we sense your hurt and your urgency. Please help us to share your heart, your sorrow, your love for the poor, and the urgency of your invitation. Shake complacency out of us. Help us to be a worthy recipient of your invitation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.