

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Reserved Table

Sunday, May 12, 2019

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Luke 14:15-24

I am not Charley Reeb. I am sorry to disappoint. I know Charley is sorry, because he is suffering with a bout of strep throat and an ear infection.

So, this is not the sermon that was originally planned for today, which was to be about the hard sayings of Jesus, but it still does have something to do Jesus.

When you think of Jesus, what do you envision? I tend to think about him standing in an arid landscape, in a white robe, with a slight aura about him, hands raised, instructing the disciples about some deep spiritual truth. What about you? What images pop into your minds when I mention the name *Jesus*? Suffering servant? Good shepherd? The infant in the manger?

Do you ever think about Jesus at a party? Do you ever think of Jesus and picture John Belushi in *Animal House*? No? Well maybe we should, because in Luke, Jesus always seems to be at some kind of party.

In fact, back in Luke 7, Jesus has been speaking to the crowds and getting in a bit of an argument about his identity. And he says to them, “The Son of Man has come ...” and you expect that sentence to end with a kind of spiritual statement like we hear in John: “The Son of Man has come not to condemn the world but so that the world might have everlasting life.” But that’s not how it ends. Jesus says, “The Son of Man has come *eating and drinking*, and you say ‘Look, he’s a glutton and a drunkard’” (Luke 7:34).

Now, let’s analyze this. Why would people say Jesus was a glutton and a drunkard, unless Jesus had been behaving in such a way that made them think he ate too much or drank too much? The message here is that Jesus was spending an unbelievable amount of time at the table, eating, drinking, partying. He was partying so much and so often that he was getting something of a bad reputation from the spiritual folks.

Now don’t tell any of your saintly friends, but this means that Jesus’ ministry was not focused only on spiritual matters and faith (as some heady mental

exercise); it was also focused on the sensual experience of community, sharing the stuff of life with neighbors, friends, strangers, and even enemies. So, I think we ought at least to make room for an image of Jesus as the party animal. This is a really important image, because I think that the table is not just a *metaphor* for the work Jesus is doing in our lives; the table *is* what Jesus is doing in our lives; the table is where Jesus is doing his work now; and, even more, the tables around which we gather now are a foretaste of the table where the saints of the Lord will feast forever.

Jesus is preparing for a party. And, you know that when it comes to a party, one of the most important questions you can ask is *who gets to come*. And a second question is maybe equally important: if invited, who will show up? I think these are the questions Jesus is posing in this parable.

At the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus is said to be en route to the home of a Pharisee for a meal. As chapter 14 progresses, Jesus shows himself to be a very gracious dinner guest. He does what all hosts appreciate: he monopolizes the conversation and lectures them about their behavior! First, he speaks to them about their manners in choosing the place of honor at the table versus a place of humility. Then, he speaks to them about invitation. He says, “When you throw a party, don’t invite only your friends and your rich neighbors, hoping they’ll repay the favor in the future. Invite those who cannot repay you, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then,” he says, “you will be repaid at the *resurrection of the righteous*” (vv. 12–14). Now, what’s that, “the resurrection of the righteous?” Right, the completion of heaven, the eternal kingdom of God.

Remember the scene, now. This is a swanky dinner party at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. You can bet this guy has invited the *crème de la crème* of his acquaintances. Around the table are the wealthiest, the holiest, the purest, the *religionist* of them all—none of the kind of folks Jesus has just said should be invited

to parties. And one of these guests, who appears to get where Jesus is going, responds, “Yes! And how blessed is anyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God!”

It is to this comment that Jesus addresses the present parable. “A man was once giving great dinner,” he says—literally a *big* dinner, “to which he had invited many guests” (v. 16).

In Middle Eastern culture a host would have sent invitations, waited to see who would respond, and then planned the menu based on the RSVP rate. Then, when the meal was almost ready, he would have sent a final notice.

This is what happens: at the time for the meal, the man sent his servant to inform those who had been invited (and presumably said they would be there), saying, “Please come now, for things are at last prepared” (v. 17).

And then the excuses start flowing in—all strangely particular excuses, which strike me as the kind one makes when it’s not a *real* excuse...

I know there have been times when you made up an excuse to get out of something you really didn’t want to do. Instead of saying “No,” you try to make it sound plausible by adding in all these details that are really unnecessary. This is sometimes hard to do on the fly, but I found this great chart on the Internet called “The Excuse Creator.” In three easy steps, you can come up with an excuse to get out of nearly anything. First, just select your lead-in, then select a perpetrator, then select a delaying factor. For example:

“I’m sorry but ... Kevin Spacey... just ran over me with a diesel backhoe.”

“You’re never going to believe this but ... the ghost of Margaret Thatcher ... spin-kicked me in the collarbone.”

“I lost track of time ... a man with six fingers on his right hand ... died in front of me.”

I think my grandmother could have used something like this. When I was growing up, my grandparents lived across town. My hometown wasn’t that big, y’all. It took all of 10 minutes to drive across it. But, we didn’t see my grandparents all that often—maybe once every month or two. It wasn’t for lack of trying. I can remember we’d ask them to come for dinner, and my grandmother always had this same excuse. “I’m sorry

we can’t come; I have to wash my hair.” And, ladies, I know that can be a long process. But, we were giving her a week’s notice and she couldn’t find another time to do that?

We only make excuses when there really *are* things we’d rather be doing, when our *own business* is more important or appealing to us than the alternative to which we’ve been invited.

So it was with these guests in the parable. The first says, “I have bought a piece of land, and I have to go out and see it” (v. 18). Really? The land that’s been there since the Pangaea supercontinent broke up needs to be inspected now?

Another says, “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I am going to try them out” (v. 19). Really? You can’t give them a bale of hay and test drive them tomorrow?

A third says, “I have just been married and cannot come” (v. 20). Ok, so maybe this is a pretty good excuse—assuming it’s real—but the obvious follow-up question is, “Wait a minute. You got married and didn’t invite me? And you knew about this huge party-of-the-century, but you scheduled your wedding on the same day?” It’s sort of like someone in Alabama scheduling their wedding on the same weekend as the Iron Bowl. How selfish can you be?

This is meant to be a *great* meal with a banquet hall filled with guests, but it’s turning into a party for one. So, the servant returns to his master and reports all of these excuses, and the master became angry. Wouldn’t you be?

What happens next is truly remarkable. The master is *intent* on having a party, and he is intent on having his house full, so he says to his servant, “Go into the streets and lanes *of this town* and bring in all the poor, the crippled and the blind and the lame” (v. 21).

Think about who the servant would have found in the streets and lanes of the town. It was the lowly poor who lived in the street. It was the lowly servants going to and fro on errands for their masters. It was the lame and the blind, those whose only means of sustenance was to beg.

So, the servant invited them all. And all apparently came, but the hall *still* wasn’t filled up. Then, the master tells the servant, “Go into the *highways and the hedgerows* and *make* people come in so that my house *will be* filled” (v. 23).

So, what about in the highways and hedgerows? Who would the servant have found? That wasn't even in the town. That was in the wild country outside the safe walls of the city. Who would the servant have encountered there? The outcast. Lepers. Rejects. The alien. Gentiles. They get to come, too.

Literally *everyone* ends up being invited to this great party! And, it's epic! The table is teeming with great food, the drinks are flowing, the music is rocking, and the house is full, but missing are the well-to-do man with his five teams of oxen, the wealthy landowner, and the village stud. Missing are all the people who are *supposed* to be at a great party. Missing are all the people who think they're something.

Instead, gathered for this party are these miserable souls who would never have imagined being a part of such a party. Of course, they're not miserable anymore.

"How blessed is anyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God" (v. 15).

The guest at this dinner party with Jesus who poses this beatitude is right. But, the parable has the effect of asking him, "If you were invited to that party, would you be among those who declined?"

It's really a question all of us must ask. If we were invited to God's great party, would we be among those who decline?

On the one hand, we may ask, "Well, who would turn that down?" It seems like a no-brainer, right? But consider that when Jesus looks at the table *in the Pharisees' home*, with all the town's religious, spiritual, and social elite—a bunch of people (frankly) just like us—and then looks forward to the table *in the coming kingdom*, he doesn't see many of them sitting at *that* table. He sees them tending to other business, to other matters, pursuing other endeavors of various importance and significance.

There is other business. There is *always* other business. And, tragically, God's chosen people have had a long, long history of rejecting what is truly the most exclusive invitation in town in the interest of other pursuits. In the prophet Hosea, the Lord cries out, "When Israel was only a child, I loved him. I called out, 'My son!' and called him out of Egypt. But when others called him, he ran off and left me. He worshiped the popular sex gods, he played at religion with toy gods"

(11:1–2). The Lord goes on to say, "My people are hell-bent on leaving me" (11:7).

What Jesus saw as he looked around at his dining companions was a table full of people who were hell-bent on leaving, who, for however much they may be willing to come to the table now, will be looking for an excuse when it really matters. They had their own ideas about which parties were important, and had no interest in coming to the one God wanted to throw.

If I may reiterate: we only make excuses when there really *are* things we'd rather be doing, when our *own business* is more important or appealing to us than the alternative to which we've been invited. And isn't that the worst judgement that could be levied against us, that we loved ourselves more than God? That we were more interested in our own business than God's?

The good news is that *we are invited* to God's party! Isn't that a fabulous thing, that we have a reserved seat at what really is the most exclusive table in town? The bad news is that people like us, people who have once accepted God's invitation to come, have also been pretty good at weaseling our way out at the last minute. This is the news that should trouble us: the only ones who will finally be excluded from table will be those who excuse themselves.

What God ultimately desires is for his house to be full of those who *want* to be there, who recognize how great the party will be and how undeserved the invitation is, and so are willing to lay aside even the most important business to make sure they're at the table when the meal is served.

The outcast, the sick, the old, and the young—they have a seat. Rich and poor, the housed and the homeless—they have a seat. The spiritual folks who come to church every Sunday and the folks who don't even know how to pray—they have a seat. Black and white, gay and straight, documented and undocumented—they have a seat. You have a seat. I have a seat. God has shown us that he wants desperately to have us at his table. He wants us at his party. He wants our fellowship, our love, our friendship, our companionship. And he has sent his servant to announce, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Meal is ready. Will we lay aside *our* business, will we save our excuses, and come to the table?



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