

September 6, 2020

"Parables: Missing a Meal or Foregoing a Feast?"

[Luke 14:7-24](#)

Read Luke 14:7-14

[Jesus addresses humility and our fundamental motivation for self-promotion; He declares that serving those who will NOT be able to "pay us back" or offer anything in return is the best way to reveal our motivational structure]

Read Luke 14:15-24

If there's an event planned in which food is involved, there's a good chance I'll be there. If you want my undivided attention, mention the word buffet, BBQ, or brunch. All-You-Can-Eat also works. I'll juggle my calendar and reroute my day to 'happen by' an event here at church or somewhere else if I know there's something to eat.

Food has always been an integral part of my life; even an idol at times. Maybe it was because I had such a hard time gaining weight, as a kid and teenager, and could get away with it. Maybe it was because I grew up in a home with two sisters and was the designated family leftover recipient. Maybe it's because God knew I was going to be a pastor and would need to be up for potlucks and funeral receptions. All I know is that I love food – except for liver and lima beans.

I remember we went to Sunday brunch at the Hotel del Coronado. There were tables and tables, as far as you could see in any direction, filled with amazing food. I remember asking for a pen and paper to keep track of all I ate. I still remember my last Sunday in Kenya, in early December of 1987. I had four 'goodbye meals' after church. And each host tried to outdo the other in true African form, acting as if I wasn't invited to eat anywhere else for the day or wouldn't have anything to eat once I left the country. As much as I love food, that was the day I realized I had limits. I have so many memories of meals: with family and friends; church potlucks; Donna Knisley's "Dirt Cake," Debe Colby's toffee, Sandy Klocker's Pecan & Caramel cinnamon rolls, John Young's BBQ . . . and whatever Jason wants to cook.

If I was invited to the great dinner/banquet Jesus talked about in this story, I would have been dizzy with anticipation. Any meal in the Middle East that involved an invitation list – especially one that is connected to a special occasion – was nothing short of a feast. My Armenian heritage gives me a pretty good sense for the tastes and aromas included in the meal. But if Middle Eastern cuisine doesn't do it for you, compose your own menu and try to visualize a banquet table full of your favorites. Think Hotel del Coronado (pre-COVID). We would not have wanted to miss it. Add to that being someone's special, invited guest and being with so many

others (which is the real treat in all this) and you have a pretty easy decision to make: "Of course, I'll be there. Sign me up."

When the first invitation came around, I would have been all over the RSVP. And I say 'first' invitation because there were two invitations connected to a gathering in Jesus' day. Remember, no mail, no phone calls, no Event Brite and Evite. Imagine; they actually had to go around and invite people face-to-face. The first invite was a little like our "Save the Date" for weddings. But the second invite was closer to when the celebration began; just before the meal was complete (which could mean the goat or cow was still roasting). So it's possible something could come up between the first and the second invitation – like it did for the three people in our story. Though they planned to attend originally, they had to back out.

In the story Jesus tells, we hear it put like this, "But they all alike began to make excuses." (Luke 14:18) I don't think the word "Excuse" translates positively in any era or culture. This is a dig at some level. The excuse-makers aren't held up as the 'good guys' in the story. But their excuses aren't shallow either. They didn't say, "I just can't do a thing with my hair" or "But my favorite team is on TV at 6 pm." The reasons they give for not being able to make the dinner involved, Land, Livelihood and Love. So before we get down on them too quickly, let's acknowledge these are understandable excuses. We may have used similar excuses before, and shouldn't get too down on ourselves either. Fred Craddock helped me suspend judgment on them when he wrote, "The forces against which God's offer contends are reasonable and well argued." (Fred Craddock in *Interpretation: Luke*) What, in your life, would have led to your cancelling?

Jesus isn't faulting them, or us, for having resources, responsibilities and relationships. But He DOES go on to remind us discipleship requires us to even put aside good and noble things. Craddock continues, ". . . God's offer has priority not simply over our worst but also over our best agendas. Those who attend do so not because there was nothing else to do but because the banquet was the best among attractive alternatives." (Fred Craddock in *Interpretation: Luke*)

I see the sabbatical I was granted in 2015 as a sort of feast God prepared for me and my family. It was a good thing. But what if, like some of my friends who postponed sabbaticals this year because of COVID, God had called me to lay that aside to come to a different banquet He was preparing for me? Would something good and worthy like a sabbatical have been my excuse? Or what about something connected to my family, and my responsibilities as a husband and father? We aren't just asked to choose between good and bad opportunities, events, and invitations. We are called to choose between great offers . . . and AN EVEN GREATER ONE.

Jesus' invitation is unbeatable! Do you agree? You may not, but let's be clear about what He's inviting us to. He uses the metaphor of a feast, but it's much more than food He's offering to those who accept His invitation to follow Him; and it's much more than a moral list of things-to-

do. What has Jesus put on the menu for us? Life beyond mere biology known as the 'undying life of God (zoe), Kingdom-living, a deep sense of purpose, selfless service, joy-unending, the perfect joining of grace and truth, unconditional love. These are good things, but it's clear from the story that the sumptuous feast He offers to EVERYONE is not without the need to sacrifice and 'let go' of other good things. Jesus doesn't water down the cost of discipleship.

And many turn down His gracious invitation, for various reasons, and that leaves a LOT of empty seats and extra food for others. So the invitations continue in His parable. To who? "The poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." (Luke 14:13, 21) The same ones He mentions in the other parable/teaching; those without Land, Livelihood and Love. And this is where the twist, or surprise, comes in. These guests can't pay the host back in any way. These guests wouldn't have been on anyone's list, which is exactly what Jesus just said. It is exactly what Mary had sung about in Luke 1 (echoing the words of the prophets); Jesus had preached this same message in His first public sermon using the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lords favor." (from Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:18-19) EVERYONE is invited to join Jesus in the work of His Kingdom and the Feast that goes along with it. But according to this parable and the whole of scripture, it turns out that the highest rate of acceptance and attendance belongs to those who know they are poor, captive, blind, and oppressed; physically and financially AS WELL AS spiritually, emotionally, relationally.

We ARE invited, whether we have a lot or a little; AND so are a bunch of others who may not have heard there is a Kingdom to enter into and a feast for them as well; that there's always more room at God's table.

So our first decision is whether or not we will put aside our other loves and responsibilities and make the Good News our top/ultimate priority; the fundamental motivational structure of our life. And then, we have a second decision to make: "Go out into the roads and the lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." (Luke 14:23)

Will we spend our energy, time and resources going 'out of our way' (to the highways and byways) inviting others to the joyful feast of the Lord?

N.T. Wright puts the challenge before us like this: Christians, reading this anywhere in the world, must work out in their own churches and families what it would mean to celebrate God's kingdom so that people at the bottom of the pile, at the end of the line, would find it to be good news. It isn't enough to say that we ourselves are the people dragged in from the country lanes, to our surprise, to enjoy God's party. That may be true; but party guests are then expected to become party hosts in their turn." (N.T. Wright in *Luke for Everyone*)

Tom Hansen – First Presbyterian Church of Grand Junction, CO

What is it that keeps you and me from showing up when the invitation comes – not just the first time but each time?

What is it that's hard to let go of or leave behind SO THAT you aren't late to the party?

What picture do you even have of the banquet God has invited you into?

And finally, if you have chosen to attend – and will keep choosing to attend "the joyful feast of the Lord," who else can you invite and bring with you?

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. What is it that keeps you from showing up when the invitation to be with God and feast with God? What is it that's hard to let go of or leave behind in your life of discipleship? What are your typical excuses?
2. What picture do you actually have of the banquet God has invited you to? Has your picture (understanding) of life in Christ changed over the years?
3. How can you spend your energy, time and resources, going 'out of our way' (to the highways and byways), to invite others to the joyful feast of the Lord? Who else can you invite to the dinner?
4. What is your main takeaway from this story?
5. What does this parable of Jesus teach us about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?