

Stories and Similitudes: The Great Feast

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Peasant Wedding" (1568) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

Background

Meals and parties are major themes in Luke's gospel. In fact, when you read the third gospel, Jesus seems to be going from one dinner party to the next. Meals and parties are important in our Judeo-Christian heritage. They not only bring people together for fellowship and nourish us, but they are also symbolic. The dinner party represents salvation—the celebration of heaven and life everlasting.

There are two components of this salvation: THE NOW: The appetizer of salvation we enjoy on earth. THE NOT YET: The full course we'll enjoy in heaven.

Meals and parties are also a part of our parable today. Jesus has been teaching around the dinner table at a Pharisee's home about how to be a good guest and how to be a good host. They are interconnected and both needed in our lives. Good guests show up when invited. They understand their relationship to the host and their fellow guests—that we're in community.

Good guests don't presume to take the best seat in the house. Or as Jesus says, better to have said to you by the host, "Friend move up," rather than, "Move down, and give this person your place." Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Between bites of roast lamb, Jesus continued. You need to be a good host too. When you throw a dinner party, don't just invite those who can pay you the favor back. Be sure to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You'll be blessed because they can't repay you. But God will repay you at the resurrection of the righteous. In other words, good hosts welcome everyone and make them feel at home, no matter who they are. The more, the merrier. Jesus was on a roll. After he finished chewing his bread, he told a story.

A certain man prepared a banquet and invited many, many guests to the event. Now this dinner party was a big deal—the choicest of foods were prepared and the finest wine would be flowing. The house was bustling with deliveries and drop offs. Servants were busy preparing dishes. Smells of the roasting meat filled the air. The village could sense the time was getting closer. Everyone was talking about the big event. All were ready to drop everything at a moment's notice when the party would be announced with the beating of drums in the street.

But not in this story. Jesus had a surprising message up his sleeve. So let's hear about the Parable of the Great Feast from...

Scripture: Luke 14:15-24 (NRSV)

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, "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.'"

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – The Great Feast



We shared with all of you that next summer will be my second sabbatical since coming to Immanuel.

The church, with the help of a lot of incredibly dedicated people here at Immanuel and in our presbytery, applied in April for the Lilly Sabbatical Grant for Clergy Renewal. If we are awarded it, it's a \$50,000 grant. We will find out at the end of August if we got it or not. Let's keep our hands folded in prayer and our fingers and toes crossed that we get it.

We had a previous recipient of the grant help us out in the application process—Pete Sieferth, who is an Associate Pastor at Northminster, another church in our presbytery. Pete has a funny story about his application for the Lilly Grant a few years ago. He turned in his application in April. And he patiently waited for the end of August to find out the results. Well, August came and went, and still he heard nothing.

Meanwhile, Andy Ross, the Head of Staff, and some of the office staff were going through mail that very day deciding what to keep and what was junk mail that would go into the recycle bin. One of the pieces of mail was from a seminary. It looked like a donation request. Andy and the office worker thought nothing of it—and into the blue bin it went.

When Pete called in later that day, he asked if a letter for him happened to come in. He described the letter to the office staff and the person he was on the phone with, interrupted and blurted out, "hold on! Wait a minute! I think we threw it away!"

The staff member ran to the recycle bin and furiously looked through the "junk mail" and found the envelope. It was opened and the message read:

Congratulations to Rev. Pete Sieferth and Northminster Presbyterian Church. You have been awarded the \$50,000 Lilly Sabbatical Grant.

It was not junk mail. It was Pete's \$50,000 ticket to a dream sabbatical in Germany to connect with his family roots. He gladly accepted the gift and went. And it was an unforgettable experience for Pete and his family.



The response of the many in our story was quite different. They purposely, not accidentally, threw out their invitation. Other things were going on in life. They were taking a pass on the party. But here's the thing:

The blessing is not in merely being invited.
The blessing is in the showing up.

When it comes to faith, there's no good reason or justification to cancel or be a no show. Nothing's more important or of greater value.

Jesus is really challenging us in this story—not letting us off easy. No excuse is valid when it comes to Jesus' kingdom. Don't let the cares of this world distract or disqualify you. Possessions, business pursuits, even relationships can get in the way of our relationship with God. We can't save ourselves, but we can certainly exclude ourselves. In this first part of the story, Jesus is encouraging us not to get so immersed in the world that you don't take time to worship, to pray, to serve God.

Jesus shares a similar idea in the Sermon on the Mount. You can't serve two masters. You can't serve both God and money.

Don't find your identity in being the "invited one" Find your identity by being there. It's not about having gone to the right school. Belonging to the right group. Being included in the right circles. Rather, respond. Be present to God. Be in the moment. Taste and see the Lord is good. Drink deep of the presence of God. Live the God-life.

The gospel invitation is priority number one in our lives, above all other claims. Good things improperly valued can get in the way of God. But things come together when they're put in their proper place and proper order. When we generously give of our time, our resources, our talents, our treasures to God, it's amazing how God gives back. Often multiplies it. Not always, but that's how God's economy seems to work.



Dieterich Bonhoeffer called it The Cost of Discipleship. Sheer grace, but it isn't cheap grace. Whoever does not carry the cross, and follow me, says Jesus, can't be my disciple. If you don't love me more than your family, even more than life itself, you cannot be my disciple. Be willing to lose it, and you'll get it back, multiplied.

The gist of the story is this:

entanglement with persons and things
can in effect be a refusal of the invitation.

Be willing to give it all up, to relinquish it all for God. When there's a storm and you're on a ship, there's a point where you have to throw overboard your cargo. In light of the situation, what was once an asset is now a liability.

He's saying the invitation to the party is time-sensitive. Time is of the essence. There's some urgency here. Your reservation can't be held indefinitely. The table is set. The food is hot. Come and get it! Don't let the food get cold. Don't miss out. Don't disappoint God who put so much into the Lord's Supper for you. Don't allow procrastination or distraction to keep you from enjoying the greatest opportunity of your life.

Thomas Merton described it as kairos time vs. chronos time. Kairos time is a quality of time, the fullness of time. Timeless time, eternal time that's loaded with meaning and purpose. The time for an event to happen. The time for an emotion to be felt. The time for the harvest to be gathered. The time to celebrate.

This kairos time, the fullness of time, is different from chronos time, that is clock time. Chronos time is measured by seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years. Chronos time is time you pass, get through, manage, or just "put in your time." Chronos time is taking the pizza out of the oven after 16 minutes. Chronos time is to be sure to clock out at 5:00 pm.

But our passage is about kairos time. And for Jesus, now is the time to respond to his invitation to the banquet. Don't miss out—the window of opportunity will not always be open. Drop everything. Don't put it off. Don't delay. Don't decline the invitation. Come and get it! As far as the things of God are concerned NOW is the time. Kairos time is about joining in God's purposes and activities in our lives. What is God doing and how can I be a part of it—now?

Jesus also talks about being a good host in this story. If people don't show up to your party, don't sulk. Broaden your circle. Extend more invitations. Welcome everybody, reach out lovingly, persistently, in a heartfelt manner. Don't give up on people too soon, go a little further. Love everybody, everywhere. Feed the hungry. Don't waste your food. Be a good host.

The good news is that God's invitations aren't exclusive or limited. He invites new people, surprising people. God wants a full house. God's call goes out everywhere to everybody: To town and country. To main streets, broadstreets, and public squares. To the highways and the byways of the big city. To fields and farms, vineyards and gardens of the country. Not just to the influential, but to the poor and needy. To the disadvantaged. Every child of God matters. Insiders, outsiders, the noble, and the outcasts. God wants his house packed. The more the merrier. The moral and the immoral. Homeowners and homeless. People from different backgrounds—culturally, socially, ethnically, ethically. Jesus isn't picky.

Compel people to come in, Jesus says. Persuade them and challenge them. Don't let God's house be empty. These words of Christ have been terribly misused throughout church history, for sure. Misapplication of Christ's words have led to Inquisitions, Crusades, and forced baptisms.

There is a much better way of understanding this word "compel" that I learned while living in the Middle East in Egypt. Whenever you make an offer of hospitality — a cup of tea, coffee, or a meal, there's a ritual, a custom you follow. It involves interplay and interaction. Kind of a playful negotiation, a back and forth. Here's an example:

Regeb: Hey YeHyeh (John in Arabic), why don't you have some tea with my family?

John: Oh, thanks for the offer Regeb, but no thanks.

Regeb: Please stay a little longer, we'd love to drink tea with you, my friend.

John: Thank you Regeb, but I had something to drink before coming here, I'm good.

Regeb: Please YeHyeh, it really would be great.

John: You know Regeb, that would be great to spend more time you, yes, thank you.

It would be rude to say yes right away. It would be rude for Regeb to not keep offering a few more times.

What Jesus is getting at, is for us to really extend hospitality from the heart to all people. Not half-heartedly, but really care. Don't make just one overture. Make three offers. In other words, be ever widening the circle of faith, rather than being clickish or exclusive with your faith. Don't keep it small. Be invitational. Don't give up too soon or too easily with others. Stay open, not closed. We can't only reach out to those we feel comfortable with. Those who are similar to us. Or just people we like—"Our kind of people." Don't only welcome people with social capital who can raise your status or pay you back.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, we learned a lot about the Qumran community. They were around at the time of Christ. It's conceivable John the Baptist may have been part of it. They were all about purity. Their writings declared that they neglected and excluded the maimed, the blind, and the lame from fellowship. Jesus said, that's not right. He's directly challenging the way they snubbed people. You see, God and Jesus love the whole world—everybody. And so should we. Rich, poor,

friends, enemies, people you connect with, people you are different from. People that can help you. People that can't. Love them all the same.

Immanuel, let's join up with Jesus' rag tag group of followers. Let's be good guests and good hosts. This involves responsibilities and rights. Serving and being served. Give and take. Come one, come all, no matter who you are. Respond to Christ's invitation of grace and growth.

I don't care whether you're King of the Hill or a Queen Bee, top of the totem pole or bottom of the pile, sitting in first class or in the back of the line. Republican or Democrat, Jesus is good news for everybody. Or as Jesus says in the previous chapter of Luke: People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. They will recline at the heavenly banquet with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, all the prophets, and Jesus himself. And, those that accept the invitation are often the ones that you'd think would not, and those who reject the invitation are those that you naturally would think would accept it.

We will be surprised when we get to heaven—who will be there.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Peasant Wedding*" (1568) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

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