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Riverside Covenant Church
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Luke 14:15-24 – Are You Coming to the Party?

Read Luke 14:15-24.

Jesus' approach always surprises me. Picture that I am telling someone about an awesome party that Jesus is throwing. And I say, this will be a great party, after all this is the guy that turns water into wine. And I say, blessed are those folks that get to go to his house and party with Jesus. And Jesus is there and he hears my excitement.

But instead of responding directly or even acknowledging what I just said, **he simply starts telling a story.**

My grandmother was a little like this. Now I loved my grandmother, don't get me wrong, but she was the type of person where you would be telling her something and you would be really excited about it and then all of a sudden she would start telling you a story as if she was not listening to anything you just said. "Hey grandmother I am really excited about going to Six Flags . . . I hear it is awesome, there is a Superman ride and roller coasters where you go upside down and there are even water rides . . ."

And my grandmother would just look at me and say, "several years ago your grandpa and I decided to add a deck onto the back of our house. We had a back porch, but there was really no good place to sit outside during the summer. You grandpa really wanted metal deck furniture, but I preferred the wicker stuff." And she would go on and on and you would wonder what in the world that had to do with my story about being excited to go to Six Flags. But sure enough, 20 minutes or so later, I would hear my grandmother say, "and the salesman that sold us the furniture told us that he used to love to ride roller coasters at Six Flags and would spend his whole summer traveling to various Six Flag's around the country and riding the rides. But he said his kids couldn't often ride the rides because they were not tall enough." The whole point of the story might have been just to tell me that I might not be tall enough to ride all the rides. (two weeks in a row . . . talking about my height, might be a complex).

That is how I picture this encounter with Jesus. This guy is exclaiming how awesome it will be to feast in the kingdom of God and Jesus just starts into a story about a guy who was preparing a great banquet and invited a whole bunch of people.

I always tell you that you should read various Bible translations to get a full understanding of what is really trying to be conveyed. Well, I am really going to emphasize this for you now because I am going to read to you from the Dan Teefey translation, which is not very scholarly at all, but I believe we have to regularly read these texts into our own words to understand what they mean in our world. So here you go. Do this sometime. It forces you to wrestle with what you think a text is really saying.

“When one guy heard Jesus talking about God's kingdom, he said to Jesus, “How awesome it is for the guy who will get to party with God.” And Jesus responded by telling a story about a guy who was going to have a party and invited a whole bunch of people. (he probably sent out e-vites) On the day of the party he had a friend round everyone up and tell them everything was ready and they could come on over. But they all started making excuses as to why they couldn't come. One said, “I just signed a contract on a new house and I need to be there when the home inspector goes through it. I am sorry I can't make it.” Another said, “I just bought a new laptop and I have to make sure that it hooks up properly to my wireless internet so that I can get some work done from home. I am sorry I can't make it.” Then another said, “I have not spent much time with my family lately. I need to make sure I put some time in with the kids.”

The friend then texted the guy having the party and told him all the excuses that everyone had come up with. The guy throwing the party was really upset and told his friend to just go out into town and down by the river and find whoever he could, the poor, those with disabilities, and anyone else that he could find on the streets . . . and invite them to his party.

The friend came back again and said that he had invited all of the people he could find, but that there was still more room at the party for more people.

So the guy throwing the party told his friend to go outside of town, into the country and all the small towns around and tell them to come to the party until there was enough people to fill his house. He said, “there will be absolutely no room for any of those that declined my invitation to my party.”

An invitation is different than being compelled to attend something. No one says, “I was invited to the courthouse to appear before a judge.” Or “I was invited to pull my car over on the side of the road and to have a conversation with a judge.” Or my favorite. I always get these reminders in the mail that it is time

for me to return to the dentist for my annual checkup. No one ever says, thought, “the dentist invited me to come back and hang out.”

What is exciting about invitations is that they are not compulsory. They are just invitations. We are given the opportunity to do something. We can take it or leave it.

There is always a certain amount of excitement that accompanies getting an invitation. There is something that feels exceptionally special when you get an envelope in the mail and it is addressed to you and you know that someone has chosen you to be a guest at a wedding or a graduation party or a birthday. We enjoy being selected.

We are generally excited to receive an invitation, **but sometimes when the party or event itself comes,** and we have to travel to get there, or we have to find a gift or other competing things happen in our life, some of the initial excitement that accompanied the invitation begins to wear off.

I played football in high school and every year there would be those that would be selected to practice as a part of the starting team at the beginning of the practice season in August. And there was a great deal of excitement and honor that everyone that was chosen felt. But there was still a month of practice before that first game and those practices begin with two practices a day in the hottest months of the year. Every year I played, after about 1 week, people would start quitting. Maybe it was the conditioning and the running, maybe it was the coach getting on their case trying to make them a better player, maybe they just didn't want to put in that much time to get better . . . whatever it was, there were always guys that would quit the team. They were ecstatic at the invitation to practice with the starting team, but when the hard work began they were gone. They were done. They never showed up but spewed out excuse after excuse. Broken toenail. More time with their girlfriend. Coach was mean. Mom didn't want to wash their uniform. Whatever. Excuse upon excuse.

Jesus tells his parable about a great banquet that he invites folk to and they were probably excited at first, but when the time came to get together they came up with all sorts of excuses about why they could not come.

Jesus' immediate audience is Jews in his day. They were indeed God's chosen people in the Old Testament. A Jew is simply someone that was born of a Jewish mother. Jews were Jews by simply being born into the right family. If your mom was Jewish than you were part of God's chosen people. And they held on to this privileged understanding of their identity in Jesus' day. But Jesus has a new message for them. Their birthright is no longer enough. In fact, Jesus says that God can make sons of Abraham from stone. It is nothing special anymore. What is necessary is following Jesus, who is God's messenger sent to them as the expected Messiah. And Jesus comes to the Jews first to share his identity and his message. They are really given first dibs on being Jesus followers. The problem is that many don't choose to follow and Jesus says it is because they come up with a bunch of excuses. They don't understand the place that God and Jesus should play in their lives. Their house, their oxen and their family is more important. None of those things are bad, they just amount to nothing in comparison to the Son of God that stood and taught in their midst.

Jesus' message isn't just for the Jews of his day though. It is for us too. Jesus has invited us all to his great banquet. He wants us there with him. He has invited us by name, but we often have a load of excuses. There is a cost to following Jesus that we aren't always willing to pay. And that is where Luke goes next. There is a cost to following Jesus. After all there is a cost to anything worth while.

In the ancient world there was a tradition of a double invitation. The first invitation tells of an event and seeks an initial acceptance, and the second is a reminder and tells the guests that all is ready and they should come. Attendance at the banquet is based on response to the invitation of God. The response intended is one that results in productive living.

In our Christian walks we really have two steps. The first is to respond to God's invitation to forgive us of our sins. I have spoken before about how I believe we often gravitate towards one of two extremes in our relationships with God. Either God is the big scary being up in the sky that we can't really get close to and that will beat us down if we do anything wrong. Or God is our buddy and we swing hand an hand through fields telling each other how wonderful they are. And I always say the truth is somewhere in the middle.

Despite our impressions of God though, there should be little doubt in your mind that God wants a relationship with you. He wants you to have an abundant life. He invites you. He says, you are valuable

and I want you to be at my table with me. The first step in our Christian walk is not complicated. It is simply accepting Jesus' invitation.

The second step is harder though. In this step we don't just send in our RSVP and say that we will be there, we actually get up and go. We have a two step process. You respond to the invitation and yes, I will be there. Then when the time comes you actually go.

The focus of Jesus' parable is on the invitations spurned by one group and extended to others unexpectedly. The question is not whether the excuses for not attending the banquet are legitimate or not. No excuse is valid when one faces the call of Jesus. Possessions and family should never prohibit discipleship.

In the passage the poor and the lame and others that have been oppressed and excluded from society are those who ultimately spend time with Jesus at the Great Banquet because they are the ones without excuse and willing to attend the Banquet. Everyone else seems to have some excuse.

This is what Jesus means when he says the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. I will be honest. This scares me. And I believe it should. Who am I in this story? Am I that privileged guy that follows Jesus when it is convenient to me? In 1 Peter that the men are studying together, Peter talks about a reverent fear of God. There is a healthy fear of God that compels us to evaluate our lives and our willingness to put everything aside and follow Christ. The reality is that the poor, lame, etc. do not have as much baggage as many of us. We got our stuff. We got our good life that gets in the way. Jesus' parable seems specifically to have been constructed to contradict membership lists excluding the lame and blemished.

Our excuses reveal our priorities. We only excuse ourself from something because we are choosing to do something else that we have placed a higher priority upon. There is nothing wrong with excuses, they often make sense. For instance, I cannot go golfing on Tuesday, because I have to work. That is an excuse, where you are placing a higher value on your work than golfing. That seems reasonable. Or if you say you cannot go to a friend's for dinner because someone in your family passed away. That is an excuse for a very reasonable one.

The problem in this passage is that the excuses of the invited guests reveal that they have placed certain things in their lives above their relationship with God. They simply do not see God's banquet as something that is urgent and important. To these people Jesus uses this parable as a warning.

The flip side is what it must be like to be God and to invite the world into relationship you, only to have them reject you. God created us in His image. He gave us a piece of himself in our creation. He loved us. He said we were very good. And even when we turned away, he sent us his Son to save us from our sin. And despite our sin, Jesus said he came to give us abundant life. And God invites us to be his co-workers in the world and to spend eternity with him. And often people say, that is really nice, but I got other stuff going on.

The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 mirrors the celebration of the kingdom banquet to which the elder brother refuses to come. He is upset that his brother who squandered his inheritance is welcomed. He too is welcomed, but doesn't want to come in because he is upset his brother is welcomed too.

Jesus determines who is and who is not included. People should respond eagerly to Jesus' invitation. Instead they are too busy with possessions and family and offer excuses as to why they cannot come. Often God has sought to gather his people, but their refusal has left them outside with others taking their place at the table. Jesus has encountered refusals by the presumed elect and acceptance among the outcasts.

The expected are absent and the unexpected are present. Repeatedly this theme sounds forth in Jesus' teaching in a discomfoting way. (Luke 13:25-27, Luke 10:21) Proclamation of the kingdom is not about reassuring people, nor is the kingdom in keeping with the busyness and many of the values we presuppose. Proclamation of the kingdom is a challenge to respond to the invitation of God. The biggest obstacles to discipleship are possessions and family, but they are also the biggest opportunities for discipleship. Something about the kingdom brings with it a sense of urgency for life and for God's future activity.

Without the concept of judgment one does not even need salvation, and any urgency about life and its importance, about justice, or even about God is, if not lost, at least greatly diminished. Grace is only grace if the outcome should have been otherwise, and the insignificance of life depends on accountability for

life. We may not like judgment, but it is a central and necessary message of both Testaments and especially of Jesus' teaching.

The parable depicts the end times banquet, with God or Christ as the host and the messengers as emissaries of God, and the parable is understood to say that those who think they will be at the end time banquet will not be. **The primary reason the story focuses on a banquet/feast** is to convey that the subject being addressed is the end-time banquet. God's fulfillment of his promises will be like a joyous banquet. (reminds of communion celebration)

Notice Jesus' comment that "all is ready." I often say something similar during communion. "The table of God has been prepared for the people of God." Jesus' point is that now is the time. I am here. I am in your midst. The party is right now . . . are you coming or not?

Jesus invites us all into a new life. A life full of possibilities and transformation. A life at His table at the eternal great party with Him in heaven. We can come up with excuses or we can choose to participate.

References consulted:

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