

Excuses, Excuses

Text: Luke 14:15-24

Hymn: "Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise" (*LSB* 680)

Today we are in the very strange world of first-century social relations, a carefully delineated world, where everybody knew their place in a very complicated social hierarchy. If you have ever watched a Victorian era period drama and thought, "What a class-based society!" you ain't seen nothing yet. The first-century Mediterranean world was far more rigid and more layered.

One of the most important ways in which these social relations were expressed was in the giving and receiving of invitations to dine. When you gave a banquet, whom you invited, or, when you got invited, which invitation you accepted was a highly significant expression of your place in that society. If you mis-invited by aiming too low, you would in the eyes of your village be dragged down to that level—"Oh, that's the kind of person you are!" But if you aimed too high, and invited the *crème de la crème* when you weren't one of the *crème de la crème*, your food would go uneaten and you would forever go down as a person who thought of himself more highly than he ought.

Likewise, accepting invitations was very important. If you accepted an invitation from somebody above you, you were accepting a compliment. Someone of higher station was saying, "I deem you worthy to sit at my table." Only a fool would say, "No." (And apparently there was a delicate social dance around it. The correct thing was to say, "Oh, I can't." And then the host would say, "But I insist." And then you'd say, "But I shan't impose." And he'd say, "You won't be. Please come." "Oh, all right."

A bit like my dad and I fighting over the check after dinner. We both know he's going to pay but the verbal tug-of-war must play out.)

This was the world that the first readers of the Gospel of Luke were living in. Everybody assumed this. No one had to be taught it. What happens here is the giver of the banquet is shunned and rejected by his equals or possibly even his inferiors, people who owe him, who are indebted to him. Notice this is not an impromptu hey-do-you-want-to-come-over-for-a-cup-of-tea-this-afternoon? This is an event that has been planned and for which invitations have already been issued. When his servant called on the various guests, he probably said something like, "You remember that invitation you accepted? The feast is ready now. Come!" No one should have been surprised.

So, when they say, "Actually, I need to mow the lawn or wash the car or change the light bulbs or watch football," what they are really saying is that the person who had invited them really isn't worth their trouble. Maybe you hear the parable and think checking out your house or testing your five oxen or spending the evening with your new wife is a reasonable excuse. But nobody who listened to this parable would have heard it that way. It was a deliberate snub. It send a message loud and clear: "Thanks, but you're really not worthy my attention."

And at this point, the master had a very limited set of options. He could say, "Oh, well," and put his food in Tupperware and be done with it, except that would mean he's been brought down a peg and would now have to find new friends. Or, he could take action to restore the honor he has just lost. In Matthew's version, a king throws a banquet and those who turn him down he has killed and their villages destroyed.

Those are the two options. You could say, “Yes, you’re right; I’m a nobody.” Or you could say, “No, you’re wrong; you’re the nobodies and I’m going to show it to you and the whole world.” Instead, the master does something completely unthinkable. he invites all the beggars. He doesn’t just go one notch down: Okay, the aristocrats won’t come, so I’ll go to the merchants. If they don’t come, I’ll go to the artisans. No, he goes right to the bottom, to the beggars—the ones who owe him no money and with whom he has no relation at all. He drops through every floor until he gets to the basement and says, “I’ll feed *them*.” And when they won’t come, he goes outside his community. He looks for strangers out in the streets. He says, “No, I’m going out to the hedges and the highways and find complete strangers and feed them, too.”

In so doing, he cuts through all social expectations. “I don’t care about your rules,” he says. “I don’t care about how you see me.” And these two halves of the story, the rejection and the reaction teach us something incredibly important about our place in the kingdom of God. The first is that the rejection of the invitation of who had already accepted the invitation in the first place is precisely the way the people of Jesus’ time, the *crème de la crème*, if you will, reacted to God’s invitation to them. They were the ones everybody, including themselves, expected to be at the top table in God’s kingdom—the Pharisees or perhaps the priests of the temple, the Sadducees. And when God sent not a slave but His own Son to invite them to the feast, they said, “Actually, no, we’re not really interested. We’re too busy with this and that.” The excuses given are bad excuses. My favorite is the third one, who doesn’t even say, “Please excuse me.” He says, “I’m not coming because I have married a wife.” Well, which came as a surprise? The wedding or the invitation to the banquet? If the

invitation was a surprise, you would have thought he had the wedding on his mind by the time he had committed to being there. But he just says, "I cannot come." Utterly irrational. Utterly ridiculous. And deeply insulting.

Because what these people are being offered is a gift. They are being offered hospitality. They are being offered a deep expression of friendship. And they're treating it like a colonoscopy. They prioritize a field or some oxen over friendship and hospitality and a gift.

Which is precisely what we do every time we respond to God's invitation by saying, "I'd love to come, but...". I'd love to come, but something else more pressing is taking up my time that day. Every week God invites us to His banquet. Every week we are invited to receive God's gift, His friendship, His hospitality. And every time we turn down that invitation and say, "We have something more pressing," we are in fact doing what these unworthy guests did. Because when we are dealing with God's invitation, what is being brought home to us is where our true priorities lie. Is this Christian life simply a hobby of ours? Is this something we do only if we haven't got a better offer? We'll turn up so long as something more appealing doesn't come along? Or is this in fact where we belong? Is this our home? Is this where we are in the presence not just of a friend but a Father, not just somebody exercising social relations but somebody who feeds us with food that no one else can supply?

The fact is, permitting for unavoidable exceptions, the place of the Christian on Sunday morning is in church. This is where we have been invited by our Lord Jesus to come and to be nourished by His Word, by the gifts of the Spirit, and by the feast of his own Body and Blood. And I can assure you with absolute confidence that there isn't a

better offer, not in Dallas or in the country or in the world, than what is being offered here today. Nowhere else, except at other gatherings of the Christian church, can you get gifts like the ones that God gives us today. And nowhere else than here are we being invited to partake in something that will not come to an end but is only the beginning of an endless feast. The excuses in the parable were not very good. Our excuses have better be really good if we cannot be in God's presence. Or what part of "You shall have no other gods before Me" do we need clarification on?

The Law of this parable is forceful and powerful and it pins us to the wall, as the Law does, because it reveals the state of our hearts. It shows us what we truly love. But the Gospel of the parable is greater and more powerful still! Because you'll notice that, unlike every other snubbed first-century host, our Master of the house does not take action to restore His honor. Instead, He acts completely contrary to every expectation to prove that His priority is not to make sure that He is honored but that a banquet is given. "I have prepared a banquet; I shall have a banquet!" "I have invited guests; I shall have guests!" "I have gifts to give; I will give gifts!"

And this is where it turns out that Jesus is not a typical first-century nobleman. No, His great priority in His life and in His death is to bring and to give and to share gifts. He goes to the beggars of the city—the outcasts of Israel—and then He goes to the hedges and the highways outside the city—the Gentiles, you and me—and He says, "Come." He cuts through all that merry dance of, "Oh, no," "But I really mean it," "I can't possibly," "No, I insist." There is no pretend negotiation. "If they don't come," He tells His servant, "grab them by the neck and march them in, because I will give my feast." This is the kind of gracious, gift-giving God that we are dealing with. You are not here

because you made a good choice. You do not believe in God because you decided that His is a pretty good offer, as though you weighed all the other offers and decided to go with this one. You by your own reason or strength cannot come to Jesus Christ, your Lord, or believe in Him, but the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel. He's grabbed you by the scruff of the neck and said, "You're going to come and I'm going to feed you."

Who are you in this parable? You are one of the ones found sleeping under a hedge, possibly in a ditch, worse for wear. And you were found by a servant of God, whoever it was that preached the Gospel to you, who has been sent to you, saying, "You are now expected at the palace. Come and eat. Come and receive gifts. Come and celebrate—not your life but the goodness of your Host." God still sends His servants into the world to issue this invitation. As a servant of God, let me issue that invitation anew: You are invited to God's heavenly banquet. Show up that you may be fed. Show up so that you may be cleansed. Show up that you may be given the greatest promotion ever, not on some social ladder but in the true hierarchy of God's kingdom, no longer a beggar in the ditch or under a hedge but a child of God, a bearer of His name, somebody clothed by Him, fed by Him, nurtured by Him, who wants to be your friend and who wants you to be His friend.

It's not just rude not to turn up. It's foolish: "I can't come because if I leave my ditch, somebody else might claim it." Said nobody ever. Dear Christians, the Lord wants to fill you with His gifts, asking for nothing other than an open mouth into which to pour them. He is here today. To Him be glory in the church now and forever. Amen.

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