

Community Church of Issaquah

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Lessons Learned: The Parable of The Great Banquet

Rev. Vincent Lachina

It's been a while since I hosted a large dinner party or any other kind of gathering where there would be lots of food. Years ago, I always hosted a Christmas holiday party, partially because I had a desire to be a caterer and loved to show off my skills. If you ever want to see pictures of some of the tables of treats, let me know and I'll show you. But with the Covid inconvenience, I think almost all of us stopped having large or even small groups come for a meal. So, this parable about a great banquet or feast seems out of our reach. Let's see what we can learn from this time of teaching from Jesus.

We only read a portion of this experience Jesus had concerning who is invited to a banquet and why. In the verses before the ones Duane read for us, there is a preface to the sad experience the host had when he had planned a magnificent banquet. Jesus had gone to the home of one of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to have bread which was their custom. There in front of him was a man with a disease called dropsy. Turning to the lawyers and Pharisees who were present, Jesus asked if it was lawful to heal the man on the Sabbath. Oddly, not one of those present answered, so Jesus held the man's hand, healed him and sent him on his way home.

Jesus noticed how the guests were deliberately trying to pick a seat of honor which led him to boldly tell them not to try to take a place of honor but rather to go to the last place setting. “When the host sees you have been humble, he will invite you to come to a place of honor.” These were Jesus’s words, “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled and the one who humbles himself shall be exalted.” In other words, don’t try to put on pretenses, but rather, know your rightful place. This led Jesus to share a poignant parable that has much deeper meaning for us.

It seems a certain person was giving a huge dinner, a banquet, and had invited so many notable people to join him. Likely his staff had spent the entire day preparing for the banquet. When everything was ready, he sent his servant to call the invited to the table. Then a rather big problem arose – no one wanted to come. The reasons for refusal were varied and somewhat weak, and surely caused the host to be more than irritated. So, he send his servant back out and gathered the poor, the homeless and anyone on the street into his home, and when there was still room, he sent his servant out again to invite anyone he could find.

The meaning of the parable is relatively clear for us perhaps. We could sum it up by saying, “Not everyone who is invited to the table of the Lord chooses to attend.” The invited guests began to make their excuses. The first one said he had just purchased some land and needed to go and check it out. I wonder why he had purchased the land sight unseen, but that’s me wondering. The second invited guest said he couldn’t come because He had purchased five oxen and wanted to go try them out to see if they could pull

a plow or whatever. Obviously, he didn't buy them at an auction where he could clearly see them and see what they could do. And then there was the third excuse that the guy had just married and couldn't come. Maybe his new wife didn't want him to go. We don't know.

If you or I had planned an elaborate dinner and had invited friends and family only to have those invitees turn us down for whatever reason, we would likely be more than a bit irritated. It's doubtful that we would open our doors to anyone we could find out on the street. With that in mind, let's give our attention to the meaning of this parable.

First and foremost, the host of the banquet, the master of the house, is God, and the great banquet refers to the kingdom of God. The invited guests that are the focus of the story represent the Jewish nation. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven was prepared for them – God's followers. But when Jesus came preaching about the kingdom of God and offering people a place in the kingdom, he was being declined. Excuse after excuse was voiced by those who could not quite believe that Jesus was preaching a message they could accept. As John says in his Gospel, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:11)

When those of the Jewish nation would not accept that they had a place in the kingdom, the master of the house, God, opened the invitation to Gentiles and to the ends of the earth. One interesting aspect of this parable is with the Jewish rejection of Christ, the blessings of the kingdom were opened to all or anyone who would come to Christ by faith. Imagine what a Pharisee must have thought about

such a statement. The tragedy of the entire story is that the host said those who had refused to come would be permanently barred and would never taste of his banquet ever again.

Have you ever had to plan an event where you sent out invitations and asked for an RSVP? Maybe it was a wedding party, an anniversary party, a graduation party, a birthday party or something like that. You waited until you got the final count, and that's how many plates you prepared or paid for. So regardless of if they showed or not, you had either paid for them or prepared for them. This was the same for the master of the house. He had prepared for all who were invited and was extremely disappointed with those who were a "no show."

Do you think when God prepares a table for us, not necessarily for eating, we make the same kind of lame excuses? Oh, I had a previous engagement. Oh, I forgot. Oh, I'm just not sure I want to go right now. What about when God invites you to spend some time with Him in prayer or to spend some time in His Word, or to spend time with God in the fellowship of others. Do we sometimes offer rather weak excuses for not being in attendance?

At the core of this parable is this wonderful truth – the commitments you make to honor the invitation to pray, or read the Word, or worship, or just spend time quietly with God, you can be assured that God loves you and is looking forward to being with you at those times. That's a good truth to give us comfort, isn't it? And to add icing to the cake, there's another wonderful truth and it is that God

wants His table to be full. God doesn't want a single empty seat. Not one.

Though I love the assurance of that, I also understand that it comes with some responsibility. Like the servant sent out to bring in the blind, the poor, the lame, the tax collectors, and any sinner, we are sent into our own world to invite those in need of Christ to come to the table. As I've said before in our communion times, everyone and anyone is always welcome at God's table both figuratively and real. Let me close with the words of the master of the house, "Come! Everything is ready."