

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 14:1-35 *"Come To The Banquet!"*

Most religions have their "sacred meals," and Judaism and Christianity of course have theirs: the *Passover* meal, celebrating God's delivering Israel from their task-masters in Egypt when the first-born of the Egyptians die; the *Communion*, celebrating God's delivering the new "people of God" from the power of sin and death when Jesus dies. Throughout the Bible, eating meals together reminds us that being "the people of God" is like being an extended family. Jesus often "shares table fellowship" with people who are coming into his new community, "the kingdom of God" - and is just as often criticized for the way he does it and the people he eats with!

At the pinnacle of all these biblical meals lies the promise of the coming "*Great Banquet*," where all God's people will gather for a huge celebration. There will be a big party! Isaiah (Is 25:6-9) foresaw it as "*a feast of rich food for all peoples; a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines - prepared by the LORD Almighty.*" There will be old friends to greet, no doubt speeches and prizes - perhaps balloons! It is a feast that nobody in their right minds would want to miss; not least because "the king will gird himself and serve his people."

So all earthly meals, especially among God's people, are pictures of, preludes to, rehearsals for, the Great Banquet. That is why eating together is so powerful, and why

in our over-scheduled "fast food" culture we miss so much when families rarely eat together. That's why Coffee Hour in a church is vital to building friendships and Christian community.

But of course when Jesus anticipates the Great Banquet in his "table fellowship," he challenges and disrupts the accepted 1st century ways of eating together, and raises pointed questions about who will be at the Great Banquet.

1) *A Pharisee's Meal*

Jesus accepts an after-worship invitation to eat the Sabbath noon meal at the house of a prominent Pharisee. Perhaps that means some Pharisees did welcome Jesus - we know of a couple, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea - or maybe this is only a set-up, an excuse to watch Jesus very closely and gather more ammunition against him. It soon appears in the form of a man with "dropsy" - an old name for what we now call edema: he is swollen with retained water, probably reflecting an underlying heart or kidney disease. Jesus does not hesitate to heal him, and so is immediately in the middle of yet another dispute over right behavior on the Sabbath.

He reminds his critics that they would not hesitate to pull an animal or a child out of a pit on the Sabbath; and that he has no

hesitation in pulling this bloated man out of his pit. That the man is “unclean,” and has crept into a Pharisee’s house at mealtime only adds, of course, to the disgust of the host and to the pointed rebuke he and his friends receive from Jesus. People who are obsessed with status and purity do not welcome sick people in their midst; Jesus of course holds exactly opposite views.

So he challenges the Pharisee’s well-to-do guests over their preoccupation with status, reward, and reciprocal relationships. *Stop wanting to sit at the top table* so that your position is affirmed and reinforced! *Stop inviting your rich friends* to dinner so that they will repay you with an invite to their houses, and your mutual admiration society can keep cycling! What you are doing shows where your true values lie, what you base your identity on. Why do you think that God affirms your values and your social ladders? You betray your inner motives, your hearts, by your social climbing, your longing for admiration and status.

2) *The Great Banquet*

So Jesus comes to the parable of the Great Banquet. The master has invited many people, and at last the feast is ready: “Come now, for all is prepared” is the message he sends out. But one by one those invited start to make excuses – they have business to attend to, they have family responsibilities. Their roles in society and among kin are more important to them than attending the banquet. The master becomes angry, for he has been insulted by their ingratitude and their social rebuff to his invitation.

So now he calls in the “*poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*” instead. When there is still room for more, those from the country lanes, the beggars and the poorest of the poor, will be “brought in” – despite their fear that they could never enter a rich man’s house! “None

of those invited will even taste my banquet,” says the master!

What is this all about? It’s no doubt an allegorical parable, in which Jesus alleges that “God’s invited ones” are excusing themselves from the kingdom of God because they are occupied with wealth, business, family, status; and much of Israel and especially the Pharisees are in danger of being shut out of the great feast to come. Once again, those who thought they were “the first” will be the last, the “exalted” will be humbled.

Instead of Pharisees and Scribes filling the tables at the feast in the “kingdom of God,” it will be the “the tax-collectors and sinners” whom they despise, but who are flocking to Jesus. Even Gentiles will come in to the banquet, while many Jews will excuse themselves. The excluded ones will be those who value family ties over affiliation with Jesus, who count the social cost of following him to be too high. They will end up like tasteless salt, which is no longer good for anything and should be “thrown out.”

3) *Identity And Values*

It is all a scathing denunciation of a group of people who fancied themselves to be among “the best” of their day. Pharisees had a long heritage, influential members, strict rules, a determination to keep themselves pure and holy, and a strong desire to see the rest of the nation return to strict Torah-obedience and righteous living – to “save the nation.” They were “the good guys” of 1st century Judaism. Yet Jesus has no time for them or their practices!

Is that not a challenging thought? As these narratives confront us, do we not wonder if we might just be in Jesus’ sights too – that we are among “the rich,” those “to whom much is given,” “those who exalt themselves,”

those who are too busy to focus on “the kingdom of God”? Is there a real danger that we too might be shut out of the Great Banquet?

So here are Jesus’ sobering tests. Are we among those who “want to sit at the top table”? If we do, there are plenty of tables, and we can no doubt get close to the top of one of them! When we are there, will we spend our time trying to ensure that nobody else creeps up there and displaces us? How much is our status in our profession or our community worth to us? Compared to what? And what happens when we lose it, as we surely will?

Do we make “excuses” to keep us away from even the best that the kingdom of God offers? Is business or family more important? Have we figured out the kingdom would demand more than we are prepared to give, and so “back off” from making spiritual commitments? I think we all know that feeling – I can remember as a young man wanting to sit in the back row of every church we went to, and always diving out the door the minute the service ended, in case anyone spoke to me, or – God forbid – asked me to do something!

The grace of God that brings us forgiveness and new life and hope through Jesus is free: we cannot earn it, any more than poor beggars from the country lanes could earn their way into the Great Banquet. It is all free, but at the same time it can cost us everything. It can cost us our pride, our self-sufficiency, our self-esteem, our social standing, our status in the world – not because these are taken away from us like weapons we have to check at the church door, but because once we have a taste of the kingdom of God, all these other things begin to taste different – a rather bitter taste, or a sense that maybe this food is past its prime and is “going off.”

But the promise of Jesus is that he “stands at the door and knocks” to come into our lives, and if we will open the door to him he will “come in and eat with us,” and we shall begin to discover the rich foods and fine wines that are metaphors for the greatness and goodness of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is a place where the food is great, and the owner serves his guests. It is a place where no-one has to fight for a good seat, because they are all good seats. It is a place where our families and our jobs and our money and our roles in society take on their proper scale, their harmony, their perspective, and their true importance relative to other things.

So do we “get” this new structure, this new non-hierarchy, this new society, this new community that Jesus came to build? Can we live with the call to humility; can we “give up” all the things that other people cling to? Is the cost too high? Or is the Great Banquet something that we are not going to miss, whatever else is on our schedules! On that day, says Isaiah 25, God’s people will not only feast, but *the Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people... he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples... he will swallow up death forever. On that day, people will say: “Surely this is our God, we trusted in him and he saved us. This is the LORD; we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”*

We have our invitations – “Come to the Banquet!” Will you come?

Let us pray...