

The Banquet is Ready!

Preached on The Second Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
June 13, 2021
Text: Lk: 14: 16-24

A very natural question someone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus might ask is “How can I know him and what does it mean to follow him?” This question assumes that we can know Christ before we follow him. But, generally speaking, we only come to know someone by spending time with him or her. If we are trying to emulate this person, as we should in the case of Jesus, then we must learn to think as he thinks and behave as he behaves. In other words, following Jesus is really like becoming his apprentice. You become more like him by doing what he does, just as you become a better craftsperson by observing and doing what an experienced craftsperson does. Throughout Luke’s gospel, as in the others, we do not confront a mere list of Jesus’s sayings; rather, we very often see them enacted, if not by the Lord himself, then by characters in one of his parables. That is how Luke helps make Jesus known to us. The Gospel for today is a case in point.

“A certain man made a great supper, and bade many; and sent his servant at supper time to say to them that they were bidden; Come; for all things are now ready.

First, some context for this parable is in order. Jesus tells this story of a great banquet at the end of a meal he was sharing with a group of Pharisees. But from the beginning of the meal, he was in hostile territory. The first verse of Chapter 14 begins: “One Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him.” Jesus is already under scrutiny; they are waiting for him to slip up. In addition, it appears they are actively intending to entrap him by having a man present at the dinner who had dropsy.

Jesus, of course, knew exactly what was going on. He asked the lawyers who were present a question: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath.” They did not speak. He then “took the man,” a phrase that indicates some form of embrace. He took him and healed him and then let go of him. Then Jesus must have sat back down and he addressed those present: “If you have a son or an ox that falls into a well, will you not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath?” Again, no response. It seems the religious professionals will not answer any challenge to their understanding of God’s Law.

At this point, Jesus pivots to warning them not to head for the seat of honor when arriving at a marriage feast. This seems like a rather abrupt jump to another subject, but we will see where he is going with all of this soon enough. Jesus had noticed how the guests at this meal chose the seat of honor as a matter of course. He advises them not to proceed to the high tables when they are invited to a feast, lest someone more honorable come in and the host asks them to move to a lower table. Choose the lower table first.

Then, if the circumstances permit, the host will invite you to move up, thereby honoring you. “He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” It seems that Jesus is trying to expose the presumption of those considering themselves superior to others.

He then turns to his host and says:

“When you give a dinner do not invite your friends and kinsmen and your rich neighbors. They will in turn invite you to a dinner and you are repaid. Instead give a feast and invite the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind. They are the right ones to invite because they cannot pay you back. And God will repay you at the resurrection.”

We’ve now covered the first half of Luke 14, and two virtues stand out in Jesus’s teaching here. If we ask how God’s people are supposed to live, Jesus tells us they are to live with humility and generosity. Humility and generosity are evident in those following Christ. Do not seek the front seats or the high tables of honor, but rather the less conspicuous seat. Furthermore, Christians should give to those who have nothing, without any hope of repayment. God honors the friend of the poor, the lame, and the blind. These ailments alone would have excluded a Jew from Temple worship. But we are to care for the sick and marginalized, not exclude them. This is at the very heart of the life of Jesus lived, and so how his disciples live as well. If we actually wish to follow him, rather than just praising him from afar, we need to practice these virtues.

With that said, let’s look at the parable. There was to be a great banquet, involving a lot of expense and preparation. “Many people” were invited, making this a large and important affair. Invitations had gone out months before, RSVP’s had been received, and preparations were made on the basis of those accepting the invitation. Animals were slaughtered and cooked based on this number. Finally, when everything was ready, servants delivered the summons to the meal. “Come! All is ready.” This was the way it was commonly done in the Mediterranean at this time.

Not to come to a banquet where one had previously indicated acceptance was a grave breach of social etiquette. It was an insult to the host. In a society where one’s social standing was determined by peer approval—who is invited to whose dinners—this was an act of social insult as well. For a whole series of guests to reject the final summons appears to be a conspiracy to discredit the host. As scholar Joel Green says: “In this instance, the socially elite of the host’s community close ranks against him and shame him publicly. Whatever one makes of their excuses—and they are pretty bad—their refusal to join the great dinner is a social strategy the effect of which is the host’s defamation.” Knowing this, we can see why their excuse giving is so egregious.

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’” (14:21)

You can't blame the host for being angry when he hears of this rude affront and unanimous rejection by his social peers. He is livid! So he tells his servant to do what would have been social suicide had he not have already been rejected—invite the lower classes. These are the people who would never be able to repay him. By this act the host is saying to those who have offended him, "I'll show them!" The host will NOT have an empty house at his feast! But the servant has already anticipated this command.

"'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room. Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, so that my house will be full.'"
(14:22-23)

The first sweep was in the town, and included "broad, main streets or public squares" and "narrow streets, lanes, alleys." Here were the poor, the beggars, and the indigent. The second sweep was outside the town in the rural areas, the "highways and hedges." Here were the vagabonds and sojourners, those who were shunned and unwelcome in the towns. All of these people were invited by the servants.

Jesus closes the parable in a powerful way, voicing the words of the host in the first person, rather the third. "I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." (14:24) It is a sentence that is filled with hurt and anger at rejection.

The Church Fathers and Reformers agreed that the banquet in this parable really refers to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. God has invited his people Israel to the messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God. But the religious establishment, the social elite, spurn the Father's invitation. They have other priorities. On the other hand, the poor and downtrodden, those considered unclean by the Pharisees, receive God's invitation with joy. The whole chapter, then, has been a survey of the ungodliness and moral blindness of Israel's leadership, culminating in the strong reproof Jesus makes against them at the end: none of you shall taste of my banquet.

There are a few things we should take to heart as we consider this parable. First, we should try to share the Father's sadness as His love is rejected. It is important for us to feel as well His grief and broken heart. In that spirit let us recall those verses in the first chapter of John's Gospel: "He came to his own, but his own received him not." We worship a God who has repeatedly experienced rejection. As his followers, we can expect the same.

But second, and more important, we see here the Lord's incredible grace and mercy. Those who are not worthy to come to the host's table—the poor, lame, crippled, blind—are now invited. That is you and that is me. We are unworthy to eat at our Host's table, but we have been invited and cleansed. How true it is: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (14:15b).

A third thing to keep in mind is the pro-active nature of this parable. It is a real call to evangelism. The poor, lame, crippled, and blind are now sought out. They are not just

invited, but they are sought out and urged—compelled—to accept the invitation. The poor and oppressed among the Jewish people are in view, but also the Gentiles. We are the servants, and bring a marvelous message of forgiveness, acceptance, and redemption. This is not the task of a few charismatic individuals, but one all Christians share. We must take it seriously, and act in a way that draws people to Christ. Jesus did not merely suggest that we share the Gospel; He commanded it.

There are many people in the world, and in our own country, who justifiably feel dismissed and cast aside. They don't have much hope for the future. They are casualties of economic globalization and the attendant breakdown of communities and institutions that at one time may have provided them some support. The dispossessed are all over the place; but at the same time, invisible. If the Church doesn't seek the out, who will? There are still many more empty seats at God's banquet table.

In the Name...