

Parables for Lent 1: *The Great Banquet*

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Luke 14:15-24

¹⁵One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

¹⁶Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’

¹⁸But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ ¹⁹Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’

²⁰Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’

²¹So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

²²And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'

²³Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'

Psalm 36:5-9

⁵Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.

⁶Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

⁷How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

⁸They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

⁹For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

It has been said that Matthew's gospel shows us all the mountain top experiences with Jesus, whereas Luke takes us from one dinner party to another. The first sentence of this chapter says: *When Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.* The "they" in that introductory verse means everyone. We are more than halfway through the gospel and the tension is rising. Jesus has already predicted his suffering and death; he has turned toward Jerusalem and is heading there with unwavering determination. The legalistic religious leaders are documenting his every move in order to build their case against him, and his followers are questioning his every move as if to divert him from the thundering religious, political and violent storm on the horizon. To put it simply when Jesus tells this parable he is sitting at one high stress meal.

As a biblical scholar, Robert Farrar Capon wrote, "Fascinatingly, considering that Jesus is consciously and deliberately on his way to his death the 14th and 15th chapters of Luke have as their principal motif, the image of a party! Beginning with a sit-down dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee, Jesus does a number of bizarre things: he performs an unacceptable healing on the sabbath; he criticizes his fellow guests' social behavior; he dispenses odd, if not nonsensical, advice on party giving, and he tops off the occasion by confusing everyone with the parable of the Great Banquet." In the next chapter, he'll regale us with no less than three

parties upon the finding of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Return of the Prodigal Son. In story after story, Jesus is teasing our imaginations to make a connection between the futility of human beings to get it right and the grace of God - which will redeem our wrongs. Capon concludes: “Only God can turn a death march – like the one Jesus is on – and the lostness of humankind into a party.”¹

You see, the Parable of the Great Banquet is one of those stories where very worldly realities are infused with heavenly truths. When you are invited to the Table and Feast of God’s kingdom, you can send in your excuses and refuse to come, but God will not cancel the party! God has prepared an expansive invitation list. Everyone will be invited. It’s a party where it does not matter who you are, or what you do, or your station in life. As a matter of fact, the best and most honored seats at the table are reserved for the people who rarely get invited to fine parties. This is a parable of grace, but it also warns of judgment. God’s grace can sound like a hard, counter-cultural word because it upends the usual ways of how we put things in order and place value on people.

This was true in Jesus’ time as it is in ours. We live in a world where if people have money, they often have power. When people with power lose

¹ Robert Farrer Capon, *Parables of the Kingdom*.

their moral grounding, they tend to use their power to make more money and have more power, and they require powerless others to exert their power over. God knows wealth and power can lure people into thinking we are self-made. It's the self-made ones who refuse to accept or believe or acknowledge that God started the party in the first place. God created the world and populated it with an eye toward abundant life and equity and flourishing meant for everyone. So when God issues the invitation to those at the top rung of the social ladder, they come up with all kinds of excuses not to come.

Did you notice how material the excuses are, how tied they are to wealth and financial success? One invitee had just bought a piece of land, another a yoke of oxen, the third was newly married, which was also a financial arrangement back in the day. You see, people with secure financial means live with the myth that they can make it on their own. However, when death is the destination down the road, as it is for everyone, only God can find us and free us and host the heavenly banquet where everyone is welcome.

So, Jesus wonders, why don't we start living the values of God's kingdom now? "When you have a party," Jesus said, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind... the people who cannot possibly repay you." It's

that last category into which all of us ultimately find ourselves. There is no way to repay the God who hosts the Great Banquet of life itself. So, if you have ever felt powerless, or left out, or like you do not belong, or if you have ever thought you were not good enough, then this is the party for you! In the Kingdom of God, every single person is significant. Everyone is welcome. And the lowest on the social scale receive the places of honor.

In the Southern Appalachian Mountains, particularly the Blue Ridge area around Asheville, North Carolina, there has a long tradition of promoting the Arts and Crafts movement. It goes back to the 19th Century when industrialization lessened the viability of small farming communities. Early on the promotion of local arts – of pottery, weaving and woodworking, in particular – enabled poor people to supplement their income and attract tourists to the Blue Ridge. Over time, all kinds of artisans have been attracted to the area’s culture of creativity and invention. One of them is a fresco painter named Christopher Holt. A few years ago the Haywood Street United Methodist Church hired Christopher Holt to paint a fresco of Jesus delivering the Beatitudes.

The fresco adorns the front of the sanctuary on the most visible wall behind the communion table. From above the table is a visual rendering of those familiar blessings of the Kingdom of Heaven lifting up the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness, the peacemakers. Committed to the arts, Haywood Street Church also has an active downtown ministry among the homeless. Their Welcome Table ministry provides a thousand free meals a week. Their Respite Center hosts poor neighbors recovering from surgery or illness. The church has a number of groups for people suffering addiction, in recovery, or struggling with mental illness.

So when Christopher Holt was enlisted to paint the fresco for the sanctuary, he chose these people from the community as his models. He said, the design of the fresco “is driven by this idea that it is going to bring into light folks that a lot of people look away from.” He noted people of means often have a hard time looking at people who are struggling in our community, who are homeless, who have problems and issues. He said, “I think one of our tenets is that we are all struggling in some way. And whether we can see it or not, we share this as humans.” The church’s pastor added, “This is not something to be ashamed of, but rather something to hold up to the light, that is part of the story of God’s family.”

So Christopher Holt gathered the kinds of folks that populate Jesus’ party at the Great Banquet, from among the homeless outreach ministries of the church, as models for the fresco. One of them was sixty-two year old Jeannette King who admits she first came to the church desperate, having made bad choices and fallen into addiction. While she posed for Holt to

paint her portrait, she said “I came to the church for a free lunch, and I found love. You come here broken, and you leave whole. After a while you feel the Beatitudes.”² You feel blessed, comforted, forgiven, merciful, whole. The mission statement of Haywood Street Church could be a mission statement for this Parable of the Great Banquet: Holy Chaos, Abundant Grace, Welcome Table.³

Friends, when we come to the communion table, we come as guests invited. We are meant to bring our joys and sorrows and entrust them to God, knowing we can never repay God for all the gifts of life and grace. In the midst of a broken world that will break your heart if you keep your eyes open, and your heart soft, we gather around this table. We come for a taste of a heavenly banquet where all people are welcomed. We eat and drink together and thus celebrate the truth that the wounds of our individual lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, become sources of healing and wholeness when we live them as part of God’s family of mutual care. May we – who are fed by God’s grace here – be gracious to go out and share the feast of God intended for all people.

AMEN.

² Asheville Citizen Times, Dec. 25, 2018

³ Haywoodstreet.org