

COME TO THE PARTY
Luke 14:15-23

Dr. J. Howard Olds
January 25, 2004

One of my favorite childhood memories is Sunday dinner. My mother was an excellent cook. Student preachers were always hungry. The combination made for Sunday dinners that would put any country club buffet to shame. In fact, my first inclinations toward the ministry came as I watched pastors feasting at the dining room table on chicken breasts and thighs while we children were stuck in the kitchen with backs and wings. It made one think, even as a child.

It was at a Sabbath dinner, during a discussion of seating arrangements, that Jesus told the parable of the Great Banquet. With it, He describes a party that is out of this world. A banquet feast that is ours in the Kingdom of God. Come let us take a closer look.

THERE IS A PARTY PREPARED.

“Come, everything is now ready” (Luke 14:17). It took me a long time to understand that the Bible is more about feasting than fasting, more about grace than guilt, more about delight than duty. Throughout the scriptures there are people rejoicing in the fellowship of one another and in the presence of God.

On the eve of King David’s coronation, over 300,000 people gathered in celebration at Mt. Hebron. When Solomon completed the temple a vast assembly of people partied for 14 days and the Bible says, *“The king went home joyful and glad in heart for all the good things God had done in their midst.”*

When Jesus was born the angels sang. During His ministry He changed water into wine, and fed over 5,000 from a poor boy’s lunch. He told stories of great rejoicing when lost sheep are found and wayward boys come home.

The dinner guest exclaims, *“Blessed are those who eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* Oh, the sheer joy of those who eat at the Great Banquet that is prepared by God for all of us.

The invitation is to a Feast of Grace.

However you explain it, the unearned, unmerited, undeserved love of God is delightful to experience. It is overwhelming. It is free. It is undeserved but it is ours as a gift. All is prepared. Come, the dinner is now ready.

One of our denomination’s television ads is a true story about Roger Swanson and his buddies who used to break into a church to play pool in the fellowship hall. The ad shows them climbing the fence, picking the lock, sneaking through the Sanctuary like robbers, finally making it to the pool table only to have the game interrupted by the pastor of the place. But instead of chasing them off as

trouble-makers, the pastor says, "Of all the people in this neighborhood you guys are trying the hardest to get into church. Here's a key, come any time you want." "That day," says Roger Swanson, "I became a minister. I knew the invitation that was extended to me. I was welcome in the House of God. I belonged in that place."

Grace is good news. Grace is getting better than we deserve. Grace is taking one sweeping look at life and exclaiming those four words, "**Better than I deserve.**"

Do you ever say that? If you take a review of your life do you say, **BETTER THAN I DESERVE?** Fifty-eight years of life and all I can say about it at this point is it's been **better than I deserve.** When I think of all the opportunities I've had for ministry, when I ponder the privilege of standing in this pulpit every Sunday, there are only four words that can explain it to me, it's **better than I deserve.** When I think about the friendships I've established over the years, in every place I've stopped off on this journey in ministry, and the friends that continue to be deep abiding friends to me today and stay in contact with me again and again, there are only four words to explain that—**better than I deserve.**

When I think about the times I've been forgiven, when I've really blown it and messed up and deserved to be kicked out and yet somebody, through grace, dared to say to me, "Well, why don't we give him another chance and maybe he'll do better next time?" **It's been better than I deserved.**

That is what grace does, it gives us better than we deserve. A loving Father invites you to a party that is out of this world. There is a seat reserved for you. It has your name on it. Come to the feast of grace.

Come to a FILLING OF THE SPIRIT.

I was playing golf a few years ago when, on a hillside far away from the club house, the batteries in my golf cart died. They ran out of juice. They went dead. As I pondered my predicament, I thought how often my spiritual batteries run low, need to be recharged, need to be plugged into the source of all energy.

Maybe you have tasted the grace of God and been to his banquet, but have you eaten there recently? At first you didn't notice. Things were running pretty smoothly. Then you had a hill to climb. It took more energy than you had in reserve.

I have never felt so empty as I have felt these last few months. Illness takes from us every ounce of physical, spiritual, and emotional strength we possess. Empty is a frightening word. It is a hunger that gnaws at the soul. It is an estrangement that leaves us far from home. It is a tiredness that leaves us lifeless.

When I have felt most lifeless, I have rolled up in blankets made by your loving hands and prayed:

“Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up Lord.
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.
Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more.
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.”

I have taken joy in the first breath of the morning, the nourishment of each meal, the acts of kindness that pour in from others. I rejoice in ordinary days of grace. Come, everything is now ready.

THERE IS A PARTY REJECTED.

“They all began to make excuses” (Luke 14:18). An excuse is something we tell ourselves to get out of doing what we really don’t want to do anyway.

There are things you want to ask about dinner invitations: You want to inquire, What are they selling? I guess it’s my age, but I seem to get a dinner invitation once a week from some investment advisor. Free dinner for two at nice restaurants. But I don’t go because I have my own advisors.

You want to ask, Who’s going to be there? To be stuck at a party with people you don’t like makes for a very long evening. So we check it out. Who else is going to this dinner? Will we be in good company?

“I have just bought some property and I must go to see it” (Luke 14:18b). How many houses or businesses have you bought sight unseen?

How exactly will you explain to God that your work supersedes his work? Maybe you never intended to sell your soul to the company store, but have you? Do you own things or do things own you?

“I have just bought five yoke of oxen and I am on my way to try them out” (Luke 14:19). William Barclay says the oxen in this story are the novelties of life. You know how it goes. I bought this boat, got these tickets, built this cabin, have this tee time. My child plays on the soccer team. Good things, pleasant things, joyful things, urgent things but not eternal things. How can we avoid embarrassment when we choose the trivial over the eternal, pleasing ourselves over pleasing God, material things over spiritual things?

“I just got married, so I cannot come” (Luke 14:20). He had a biblical reason to stay home. The Bible was supportive of him. In Deuteronomy 24:5 it says, *“When a man takes a wife he shall not go to war, be charged with any business but shall be free at home for one year and shall cheer up his wife which he has taken.”* God knows our families need us. Indeed they do. Fixate on your family instead of focusing on your family and everybody is hurt. Your children are not gods. Your spouse is not your sunshine, your only sunshine.

Make your family God and you will put on them a burden too heavy for that

family member to bear. I've seen it happen over and over again, where parents worship children or one spouse worships the other spouse. Only God is to be worshipped and we would be wise to know it down in the depths of our hearts and lives.

THERE IS A PARTY CONTINUED.

When God plans a feast it doesn't stop. When God plans a festivity it's going to happen. You may be there or you may choose not to be there, but God's party is on. It is going to happen. He comes to the servants and sends an inclusive invitation. This is really the point of the parable.

"Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21b).

As Phillip Yancey tells the story, a woman and her fiancé went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and planned their wedding reception. They both had expensive tastes so the bill amounted to \$13,000. Shortly thereafter the groom got cold feet and backed out on the wedding. The Hyatt contract was binding so the woman, who ten years before had spent some time in a homeless shelter, decided to use her savings to treat the down and out of Boston to a night on the town.

She changed the menu to boneless chicken in honor of the groom, sent invitations to the rescue missions and homeless shelters across the city. That night people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off cardboard dined, instead, on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d'oeuvres to senior citizens propped up on crutches. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from their hard life on the sidewalks and sipped champagne and danced to big band music. It was a party to remember.

Now Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven will be that kind of party. Everybody is invited. One of the problems that we have with the Kingdom of God is that it's so inclusive. Be careful who you hate on earth because you might be seated beside them at that Great Banquet in the sky. When God throws a party, everybody is welcome.

Then there is an interesting thing further that happens in this story. They come in and report that there is still some room. It is a compelling invitation. *"Go out to the roads and country lanes, and compel them to come in so that my house will be full"* (Luke 14:23).

Is there an empty seat in the house? Are you compelled to fill it? Have you any compulsion that it might be your responsibility to fill up God's house? Is that your responsibility at all? It would seem so from this parable.

The Institute of American Church Growth asked 10,000 people why they came to church the first time. Here is what they said:

2% - special need
3% - walked in
6% - pastor impressed me
13% - programs interested me
76% - friend or relative invited me

How long has it been since you invited a friend, relative, neighbor, co-worker, stranger to church? When are you going to begin?

Jesus has a table spread, where the saints of God are fed.
He invites his chosen people to come and dine.

Come to the party. It was meant as a place of grace for you. Come to the party.
Bring others with you.

Amen.

