

Awkwardly Compelling: John 14:1-24
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Whenever we look at a parable, we want to know why Jesus is storytelling. And this is an important piece of information to know when we are trying to understand this parable.

Jesus is in the home of a very well-known, upper-crust person. He's been invited to a dinner with all of the local who's-who of the town, so that they can get an idea of just who he is, and what faction he will be aligned with. Then, things go off script.

There is someone else in the room, which isn't that unusual, since at banquets such as these the doors would be open and the community might come by to listen to the ideas and thoughts of the important people as they ate and reclined at the table. But this person is a little bit unique. This guy has an obvious difficulty; an illness in his body that most of the community would assume was a judgement for his sin.

So, Jesus decides to test the testers — is it legal to heal on the Sabbath or not?

This isn't the first time that Jesus has confronted this particular issue in Luke. Twice before, Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, and the religious leaders have been angry and humiliated over it. Now, Jesus brings the fight into their home.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He's just insulted his host, pointing out his hypocrisy in a very public way. Then he moves on to insult every guest in the house, telling them that their social hierarchy is absolutely backwards. They presume too much, and offer too little in the way of true humility and generosity. True humility would offer healing on the Sabbath, true generosity is hospitality actually given away, not exchanged.

So, in comes the guy trying to save the savior. He tries to lower the temperature in the room with an empty moral platitude, "Despite our differences, isn't it great that we are all going to eat at the big banquet in the sky?" Essentially, he tells Jesus that the Pharisees are justified in their position, just as much as Jesus is justified in his.

Rather than taking this white flag, Jesus tells a story that is, to quote Foghorn Leghorn, about as subtle as a hand grenade in a barrel of oatmeal.

In a time when refrigeration wasn't an option, this two-stage invitation would be normal and expected. Besides, everyone on the guest list would know each other in the smallish communities of the ancient Middle East. These are people that the host is familiar enough with to make sure that there isn't a scheduling conflict. He gets their commitment to come so that he knows how much food to prepare, and they know to set aside the time to come and eat it. The second time that the servant is sent out is kind of like ringing the dinner bell. The food and preparation is all done, all that is left is to come and celebrate. The host, and indeed the whole community, would anticipate this as a social event with excitement!

This is why the refusals are so surprising! Not only so, but the excuses are ridiculously transparent. The guests are trying to shame their host with deplorable rudeness.

A field? This is one of the most important decisions that a person could make at that time, a potential source of wealth and provision — every stone, clump and shrub would be known before purchase. This guy just wants to look and bask in his purchase.

The oxen are an indication of how wealthy the next guy is — five yoke would be enough to work between two and five times the average farm. Similar to buying a car today, these oxen would have been carefully inspected, and even worked, prior to purchase. This guy just wants to enjoy his wealth and status as a major player.

The third one is the closest to being legit. Since women would not usually be invited to these gatherings, perhaps this doting husband is simply being chivalrous? Perhaps we have a scheduling conflict?

Nope. A banquet like this and a wedding feast would fill the social calendars of all the same people! No one would double book a feast on the same day. Not only so, but before Netflix, these events were the entertainment in the village, something to break up the monotony, to be looked forward to with excitement. The groom had enough time to prepare to be at the feast, yet had the audacity to accept an invitation that he did not intend to keep, and then simply offers a brusque, “I’m not coming.” There isn’t even a hint of remorse or politeness in him!

I imagine the poor messengers bringing in these excuses. As soon as one finishes his message, the next arrives to fill the awkward silence with yet another poor excuse. All the while the host’s face turns one more shade of red from embarrassment and anger. Finally, he realizes that all of the time, money and food of the banquet is about to be wasted on ungrateful guests.

So he refuses, and turns the shame back on the invited guests. He invites the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind to come and eat their fill. When there is still room, he invites the people from outside the community, the foreigners, travelers, strangers, even the unsavory characters to come into his home and feast.

Those originally invited? The feast won’t wait for them — it will proceed exactly as planned, with more appreciative guests.

After Jesus shares this story, I imagine that you could hear a pin drop in the room as people digest the ideas. He has created a very awkward silence around the table, and indeed throughout the whole house.

The Pharisees know that this is a story against them — they are the original guests, the first ones to receive the invitation, and like them, all of Israel received the first covenant with God. But then other priorities took over, and they instead celebrated the blessings of the land, the wealth and the families, all of the things that indicate social status both then and now, above the one who gives those blessings. Even worse, they use those gifts to shame the giver.

The listeners around the table are just as stunned. They’ve been excluded from the Pharisee’s table. Like the sick man Jesus healed, they could only listen from the outside, awkward in their presence, yet not wanting to miss out. Suddenly, they aren’t the most awkward ones at the house any more — Jesus has systematically alienated, insulted, and verbally spanked every important person in the house.

Instead, Jesus tells them that they will be at the table of God where the elite are notably absent!

Then the real shock. People who are from — gasp — the outside! In the distant past, people outside the town were unknown, unconnected, and therefore, potentially dangerous! They might be the ones who would try to rob you as you walked to your fields, or to another town! They might be the ones who compete with you for day-labor! They might even not be Jewish!

Imagine how it feels to hear this message. If you are one of the powerful, elite, you have just realized that the man with the disease is going to be sharing the kingdom feast with you. In fact, he is going to be seated ahead of you, with higher honour, unless you can get your priorities sorted out. You've always assumed that you're in because you've got the right heritage, the right job, the right religious practices — yet this man that you've barely noticed except to avoid so he doesn't make you unclean, is somehow included before you!

If you are the one on the outside, then you are hearing, perhaps for the first time, that God is for everyone. You belong. Despite your social station, nationality, history, ability, or religious perfection, Jesus makes a space for you.

Jesus makes it clear — they are invited.

Scratch that. They aren't invited. They are compelled.

Interesting word, compelled. I think that this could be misread in a few different ways.

Compelling could mean using a stick. It could also be using the carrot. But there is a third option, and this is the one that I think Jesus has in mind.

Reality. The reality of goodness is compelling. What about painting a picture of the hospitality, the lights in the darkness, the smell of savory food? The laughter of an event that they had no idea they could come to? For those who had only an isolated evening of darkness ahead of them, the opportunity to feast, talk, and rest would create a strong longing to come.

The servants are told to compel their attendance.

In this way, the story that Jesus tells is both an instruction to be compelling, and an example of what compelling looks like! The question that Jesus asks, and then allows awkward silence to consider is, "What compels you?"

The three rude guests in Jesus story were compelled. They were compelled by their possessions, by their wealth, by relationships. Each of these things, in their proper context, is a gift from God. A field, properly viewed, feeds the hungry, and allows people to have meaningful work. Oxen, properly viewed, allow someone to multiply their efforts, so that they can care for more than just their own, but also for those around them. A partner is a gift from God, a delight, and a reflection of our own covenant with God.

But these gifts are not properly viewed. They are instead turned to self-reliance, pride, and status. They are used as excuses to shame someone else. The giver is forgotten, as the shiny gift compels a higher devotion. The story that the lives of these guests are telling is one of pride, wealthy arrogance, and outright rudeness. Not a very compelling story of God's people!

Consider the man with the illness earlier. He began the evening by going to the feast, hoping to hear something interesting. As the food is served, he smells the savory aroma, and his stomach rumbles. He sees the rich men reclining at their ease, and he shifts his feet from standing there

for so long. Then, he becomes a sermon illustration. He is singled out, brought forward, and his shame is highlighted in powerful company. And then, he receives a miracle. His body is made whole. Rather than temporary satisfaction from a meal, the man receives life from God.

I ask you, what might his reaction be to Jesus? Will he focus on the lack of what he experienced, or the wholeness of what he received? What kind of story will he tell his family? His friends? Will he describe the dishes, the crowd, and the conversation? Or will he talk about the healer, the authority that rebuked his sickness and made him well?

What makes the more compelling story?

At one point or another, we are all three characters in this story. We are the poor outsider, compelled by a lifestyle we can never attain, and hanging around the fringes, hoping to simply bask in the reflected good life. We are also those who are compelled by that same lifestyle, striving for security, wealth, and love. We want the kingdom of God, but we want it when it is convenient for us. We are also the servants, compelled by the sounds, smells, tastes, sights, and feelings of the great banquet, sent out to tell the story, to paint the picture so that strangers, outsiders, and those excluded feel a need to respond to the Master's invitation.

An Egyptian man, Sayyed Qutb, went to the USA and was lonely, isolated, and unwelcome. He noted that beyond inhospitality, American culture was sexualized, liberal, and hypocritical, even in churches. He went home, was radicalized, and wrote prolifically about the west based on his experience. His writing became foundational to another famous name — Osama bin-Laden. The story that he experienced in America was one in which people were so compelled by their appetites that they had no room for him

On the other hand, a Palestinian Muslim became a Christian after attending a church event out of curiosity. He went to Cypress to attend a conference and met some messianic Jews. They found out he was a Palestinian. They went to find their pastor, and surrounded the Palestinian. The Jewish pastor got a basin of water and washed the Palestinian's feet. As he dried the man's feet with his suit jacket, the Jews repented and apologized for the atrocities against Palestinians in Occupied territory. Compelled by the love shown him by these Jewish believers, he went to the USA, and became a minister to Jewish people.

This is our challenge. What compels us? What demands our devotion? What story are we telling with our lives, our words, our priorities?