

February 7, 2021
The Kingdom of God is a Party
Luke 14:12-24

Remember when you used to gather with friends and family for a big meal? And then someone said something totally awkward ... and there is this uncomfortable silence?

Jesus enjoyed a good meal, too. In Luke 14 we read, *"One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching him closely."* Then Jesus says to the His host, *"When you put on a luncheon or a banquet, don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbours. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."* Cue the awkward, uncomfortable silence.

Perhaps to change the subject, *"Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, 'What a blessing it will be to attend a feast in the Kingdom of God!'"* That may seem like an odd thing to say. But there is a context to the person's comment. Jesus was at a meal with Jewish teachers and leaders. They were all eagerly anticipating the age of the coming Messiah. The prophets taught that, when the Saviour promised by God would come, it would be like a great banquet. People would experience first-hand God's lavish love, celebrate deliverance from their enemies, and their cups would overflow with joy. And, they believed, literally, it would be a time of abundance and feasting, too.

In particular, Jesus is eating with Pharisees. The Pharisees were the Jews who took their religion MOST seriously. They believed all the right things, did all the right things, followed all the right laws, they made all the right offerings. They had dinner with only the right people – faithful Pharisees, people just like them. There was no doubt that when the celebration of the Messiah came, they would be there. They deserved to be there.

And so, as the topic of conversation turned from the meal they were actually eating, to the feast that would accompany the coming of the promised Saviour, Jesus tells a story.

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests." In that culture, if you were hosting a "great banquet," you needed to know how many people were coming so you knew how much food to prepare. Weeks ahead of time you sent invitations specifying the day, but not the exact hour. The day was set, but the exact time was left loose, because before fridges and microwaves, you were never sure exactly when food would be ready. Guests were expected to keep the afternoon and evening of the banquet day clear. On the day of the feast, when all the food was ready, a servant was sent to each guest with a second invitation, saying, *"Come, for everything is now ready."*

In Jesus' parable, the first invitations had been sent out long ago, the RSVPs received, and the food ordered. The coming feast was the talk of the town. Finally, the day came, preparations were completed, and *"At the time of the banquet the host sent his servant to*

tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'" But one by one all the people who had agreed to come came up with excuses.

1. One had bought a field. Though it was late, he just had to go and look at it. It wasn't as if he had never seen it before. Like today, buying real estate two thousand years ago was not a quick decision. Back then, people bought local. They would have checked it out. They would know the land well. This is just an excuse.
2. Another guest had bought new oxen and had to try them out before dark. But he had already tried them out. Buying oxen was like buying a used car today; you always "test drive" draft animals before closing a deal. It is just an excuse.
3. Still another had just got married. Just like this feast, Jewish weddings were elaborate events, planned months in advance. Both the date of the banquet and the date of the wedding were known ages ago. Yet the groom had agreed to come to the feast; presumably intending to bring along his new bride. Why not? More food. Another party. It's all good. But now he reneges. It is just an excuse.

Each excuse seems plausible, but it's really only an excuse. Someone has called excuses, *"the skin of a reason, stuffed with a lie."* The truth is the guests simply don't want to come.

When the servant returns to his master, the host is angry. Understandably so. He has spent the money, prepared a banquet, and now guests who agreed to come are stumbling over themselves to find excuses. The host is left with food, wine ... and an empty table. So, he takes steps to fill the empty places. He sends his servant out to call in people from the local streets and alleys. Even then there is room, so the servant combs the highways and byways.

People who had never known a feast in their lives enjoy the party. They are full to overflowing. Those who have only known pain and suffering, experience full bellies, joy, and satisfaction for the first time. Those who have never known anyone of significance feast with the lord of the manor. But the originally invited guests miss out. At the end of the parable the Master says, *"I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet."* It's a sad epilogue.

So what is Jesus saying in this story?

At one basic level Jesus is challenging us to think about our hospitality (in non-Covid times!). Tom Wright comments, *"Many years ago, I preached a sermon on this passage. I emphasized the extraordinary way in which Jesus tell his hearers to do something that must have been as puzzling then as it is now. Don't invite friends, relatives and neighbours to dinner – invite the poor and disabled. The sermon had a strange effect. In the course of the next week my wife and I received dinner invitations from no fewer than three people who had been at church that day. Which category of guest we came into we were too polite – or anxious – to ask."* Over and over again, Jesus does encourage us to practically care for the poor, the disabled, and the hurting. How do we do that? Especially in Covid times?

In response to the man's comment, *"What a blessing it will be to attend a feast in the Kingdom of God!"* the parable Jesus tells is NOT about literal food and drink. It's about the

Kingdom of God. It's about our relationship with God. It's about life with the Messiah.

How is the Kingdom of God described? What does life with God look like? Sometimes we have a rather dour view of life with God. For some, Christianity has been presented as making us do all the things we never wanted to do, while putting a stop doing all the fun things in life. This was the legalistic religion of the Pharisees.

Jesus describes the life with God – His coming into our lives – as a party. To enter the Kingdom of heaven, to accept Jesus' invitation to be our Saviour and our Lord is a great time. Jesus comes that we might have life and have it abundantly. Jesus presents life with God as a joyful, life-giving, celebration – now, and for eternity. Walking every moment of every day with Jesus is the most joyful, meaningful, fulfilling way to journey through life ...

The good news and the not-so-good news

The good news? **All** people, everywhere, are invited to new life in Jesus. The not-so-good news? It is a personal decision we all make as to whether we choose to accept the invitation and come to His table. No one forces us to come. And there are excuses.

Some of us may be like the first man; we have a field and we have to look at it. Is looking at soil fun? Really? Compared to a party? Jesus invites us to spend with Him, but we're watching TV or YouTube, binging news, we're tired, we're bored. We're just too "busy."

Some of us may be the second man, "*I've just bought a new _____ (fill in the blank).*" It's going to make me SO happy. In the long run, whatever is new gets old. The thrill doesn't last. Jesus invites us to experience real life. We're just too busy.

Some of us may be the third man, I've got to work/study/clean/ wash my hair. I've got so much fun to have/things to enjoy/places to go (in Covid, maybe not). But when things get back to normal, there will be so many things to do. In the end, are we going to say, "*I wish I spent more time dusting!*" or "*I should have spent more time at work?*" Or are we going to say, "*I'm not content. I needed to spend more time with God/with people?*"

Sometimes NOT BAD things can interfere with the BEST things. At one level these excuses are all good excuses. Looking at a new field isn't a bad thing. But a feast with Jesus would be better. New things are not bad. But a feast with Jesus would be better. Working hard and going places are not bad. But a feast with Jesus would be better. And when those not bad things keep us from the BEST things – spending time with Jesus – they do become BAD things. Jesus is warning the Pharisees that they are not BAD people, but they could be so much BETTER people – the BEST people – if they opened their hearts and welcomed Jesus in. Jesus will welcome any and all people who do welcome Him open hearts and open souls.

Consider another option: go to the feast, then ... The first man could go to the feast, have a wonderful time, and then visit his fields carrying the meal with him – literally – in his full belly. The second man could celebrate at the party, then ploughed with his oxen reliving the banquet in his mind, humming happy tunes, with a smile on his face. The third man could

take his bride to the gala, they would have a fantastic time, and have great memories to share together over and over again. The feast could make their lives SO much better.

We're invited to the banquet – to life - to walk with Jesus, every moment of every day. Jesus is asking us if we are settling for the merely “not bad” instead of “the best.” Ultimately, life without Jesus, or with only a half-hearted, lip-service commitment to Jesus, is really empty. Going through life without Jesus may seem like a good time, but at the end of the day life is less than it could be. The most fertile field, the strongest ox, or the best marriage are all good, but could be so much better if Jesus is the foundation of our lives. The choice is ours.

Living with Jesus

My early years were spent working hard (top of my class in high school and UBC geography), playing hard (I cycled miles every week, played soccer, and briefly was on the UBC freshman rowing team), and socializing hard (a few too many late nights drinking way too much coffee – no, I never did get into alcohol). In many ways it was good life. I had great prospects. But there was a meaninglessness to it all. I had a nagging sense there must be something more. Those of us, who lived without Jesus, know how empty, bleak, and pointless life can seem.

When I began reading the Bible, began praying to God, and going to church, I discovered there was a whole new dimension to life – a relationship with God, a sense of purpose, and experience of His presence, peace, and joy – I never knew or imagined.

- On the one hand, there was an intellectual component to my faith. As I investigated who Jesus was, what He said and did, Christianity – real, biblical Christianity – just “fit” my understanding of myself and the world around me. Life made sense.
- On the other hand, there was spiritual component to my faith. I **felt** God’s presence in my life. When I prayed, I **knew** He was there. When I struggled, I was **aware** of His comfort and His strength. When I needed direction, I **sensed** His guidance.
- On a (third?) hand, there was a relational component to my faith. At church, I found community. Real friends, lifetime friends, and deeper connections with people than I had known before. The Kingdom of God, I discovered, really was (literally) a party!

Since I came to faith 40+ years ago, there has been a lot of grunt work – ploughing fields, wrestling with oxen, going through good times and tough times. At times, life is hard – for all of us – Christian or non-Christian. But having Jesus as my foundation has made all the difference. Knowing He is with me, living in His presence, being filled with His Spirit, and living in His community has made life infinitely better than it otherwise would be.

Remember when you used to gather with friends and family for a big meal? Won't it be great to get back to that? Life now is OK, but we know there could be so much more. Life, without Jesus, is a bit like living in these Covid times. Life with Jesus is like life with the big party. Don't take it for granted. Enjoy it.