

July 29, 2018

Lesson 9: Parable of the Great Dinner

Scripture: Luke 14: 15-24

Context:

In the last lesson in the unit on Jesus's call for mercy and justice, a final parable of Jesus is examined. The parable is known as the Parable of the Great Dinner. The setting of the conversation is actually at a dinner party. At the start of chapter fourteen in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been invited to a dinner party on the Sabbath at the house of a Pharisee. All their eyes are on him throughout the dinner.

Of course Jesus is not the conventional dinner companion. He sees a sick man and asks a rhetorical question about healing on the Sabbath and if it is lawful. He then heals the man. After the healing, he makes a point about how the dinner guests pick the best places to eat and do not understand hospitality.

As if Jesus has not stepped on enough toes, he tells the host about the guest list that is to include not just the high and the mighty, but all those around them. This banquet is to include the poor, the sick, the crippled, and the blind. They will not be able to repay the dinner host, but the host and the people will receive a blessing in what has been done.

Following his point about dinner guests, someone tells Jesus that those who are to be blessed who will eat the feast of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the speaker is trying to make a theological point or just have something to say during the dinner conversation. Whatever the point may be, Jesus takes it as an opportunity to talk about the radical inclusivity of the Gospel. Jesus did not even need to search for an illustration to make his point about who all is included in the Lord's feast in this life.

He sets up the scene much like the scenario he and the other guests find themselves. There is a large dinner and many people are given invitations. Yet as a messenger approaches the invited guests that dinner is ready, they all have excuses. Some cannot come due to business reasons while others have personal reasons. The servant returns to the master with all their excuses and the master doesn't miss a beat. They tell the servant to go to the city's streets and invite all the poor, crippled, blind, and lame. Even after the servant gathers those individuals, the messenger is to go to the entire city and invite everyone they can find. The original guest list is thrown out the window.

The parable could be heard in several different ways. From a historical perspective to the audience where Jesus sits, it could be the statement that the prophets have given the first invitation to follow God and now Jesus offers an invitation to both the Jews and the Gentiles.¹ Polemically, it could be heard as a defense and justification of those in the church whose membership would have been rejected by others in the church based on differing criteria.² Or the parable could have been heard as the author writing to the early church warning them not to become "the establishment" where pious phrases

¹ Fred B. Craddock, "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1990), 180.

² *Ibid.*, 180.

were uttered and people no longer invited the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind.³ Whatever the case, Jesus is making the point that God's grace and goodness is open to all, regardless of century or background.

Application

Jesus certainly knows how to liven up a dinner party! As I read this passage, I imagined Jesus there in the middle of the dinner conversation with all eyes on him with ears wide open. They've seen him heal a man at the table and even lecture other guests on where they are to sit. And then Jesus tells them what a real banquet looks like in God's terms.

Yet I also imagine what that looks like in today's world. As I read the story I couldn't help but think of all the places where I have received Holy Communion and what happens in that moment of worship. Sometimes the places look very different. There is Lambuth Chapel at Blue Lake and we are all gathered in shorts, t-shirts, and sweat dripping from our brows in the midst of the summer heat. Other times have been at the churches I serve, ranging from contemporary services to very traditional services. At the contemporary service people may be in jeans and even t-shirts. At the sanctuary services, people may be dressed to the nines in suits and pearls.

Even though these are very different settings, each of those moments and places are sacred. Despite the clothes we wear and the masks we put on our faces, we are all still broken humans with doubts, insecurities, and weak spots when we come to the altar to receive the elements. All are sinners who mess up each and every day. Yet all are welcome at the table that Jesus has prepared and each guest is seen as special and important.

Even in our brokenness, we are so loved that Jesus wants us to come to his table and be treated as a guest in a place of honor. He is the ultimate dinner host who wants to nourish us spiritually and emotionally. There is a place at the table for all of us and for all those around us.

Reading this parable today reminds us that thankfully Christ's table is not just for the important, the prestigious, and the perfect. Christ's table is one that is open to all. Here we all dine and all are equal in God's sight.

The passage also reminds us that we are to see those beside us, all people, as fellow dinner guests. None of us are better than others and none of us can claim status as the only children of God. Our race, sex, marital status, economic status, and age have no special privileges when it comes to God's grace. Thankfully, God's guest list is not our guest list and we are not the ones who get to determine who invited. Instead, we are to be humble guests excited to be at the party.

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³ Ibid., 180.

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