***PARABLES THAT PREACH: THE GREAT BANQUET***

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Text: Luke 14:1, 7-24

Like a surprising number of you, I grew up as a PK - a preacher’s kid – in a small town with all the joys and challenges that status presents, including the opportunity to critique my father’s sermon at the dinner table each week – a tradition our kids continued! Pretty much every Sunday, friends from the church were invited to our house for Sunday dinner after worship; my mom would have a pot roast or leg of lamb or some other big meal prepared followed by at least three different kinds of homemade cookies and ice cream; we would eat and talk and eat and then sit around the dining room table visiting well into the afternoon – unless the Steelers were playing in which case several of us adjourned to watch the game and keep the others updated on the score. Most of the friends who joined us were like family, but occasionally we had visitors who were less familiar but no less interesting. It was there that our church organist convinced me that I could not take my college Music Appreciation course pass/fail as I had planned, because it would be a total embarrassment to do so. As it turned out it was a total embarrassment NOT to take that Music Appreciation course pass/fail! Lesson learned! There was a lot of love, laughter, and good food shared around that table those afternoons!

Those Sunday dinners came to mind when I read this passage from Luke’s gospel. Jesus is at Sabbath dinner at the home of the leader of the Pharisees. He is there as an invited guest, a stranger in their midst who has a notable but somewhat controversial reputation for preaching, teaching, and healing. The Pharisees aren’t really sure what to make of him; some condemn him, some fear him, some are curious about him from a distance, and some want to see and hear for themselves what this itinerant preacher is all about. “*They were watching him closely*,” notes Luke. But Jesus was also watching them and saw an opportunity to teach them some lessons about table manners and the Kingdom of God.

In the movie *Remember the Titans*, a quarterback who has moved to Virginia from California tries to take a couple of black teammates into a restaurant in Alexandria in 1971. To his surprise the white owner rudely refuses to serve them; he suggests that if they come around to the back, he will bring them a plate of food. Table fellowship was not something to be shared across racial lines in that restaurant in 1971! Racism rejects God’s call to show hospitality to a stranger if the stranger is of a different race, but God’s call makes no such distinction. In his *I Have a Dream* speech Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks of his dream of a “*day on the red hills of Georgia, [when] sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood*.” It is a day when God’s call to hospitality is lived out in table fellowship across the lines of race – at table with one another – for we are to welcome one and all because God loves us one and all.

The Pharisees with whom Jesus ate, like the owner of that Alexandria diner, had strict rules about who could sit at their table and who couldn’t. They didn’t eat with tax collectors or sinners, prostitutes or Samaritans, Gentiles or those they considered unclean. To do so was to be tainted by the stranger’s presence at the table. That was the criticism leveled at Jesus – he ate with outcasts and sinners, with the Zacchaeuses of the world. He got too close to those who were sick and diseased. He showed love to those who the Pharisees disdained. Table fellowship for the Pharisees was not about hospitality, but about the right people at the right place at the right table. There was a pecking order – seats of greater honor and seats of lesser honor, but those with no honor in the Pharisees’ eyes had no place.

Jesus sat in one of those seats of honor at the home of the leader of the Pharisees and watched the way the other Pharisees tried to exalt themselves and claim seats of honor at the table. Jesus watched and then suggested a more humble way:

*Don’t claim the seat of honor, lest you be embarrassed to have the host move you when someone of greater honor comes. Claim instead the less honorable seat – then you have nowhere to go but up.*

And to the hosts he said,

*Don’t invite just wealthy friends or relatives who might invite you in return. Invite those who can’t return the favor – the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. In doing so, you will be blessed.*

The table manners Jesus commends are humility and grace, kindness with no ulterior motive, expecting nothing in return. All who sit at the table are equals and so as hosts and as guests we are to be humble and gracious in giving and in receiving, for God in Christ has been humble and gracious toward us. “*Those who exalt themselves will be humbled*,” says Jesus. “*And those who humble themselves will be exalted*.”

In his book *The Jesus Way* Eugene Peterson notes:

*From the Mount of Olives, a mile east of Jerusalem, looking south, Herod’s burial mountain castle, Herodium, is still prominent on the horizon, while Jesus’ birth cave is obscured by the lumpy church building. Nobody ever worships at Herodium.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Monuments don’t make the man. The one we worship had no castle or grand palace in life or in death; he was humble and calls us to be like him, to take the lesser place of honor, to invite to the table those who have no table to which they might invite us in return – in a word to practice grace and graciousness at the tables at which we gather day to day.

For a moment it seemed as if those at the table with Jesus grasped his message. “*Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God*,” said one of the dinner guests. Then Jesus told this parable of the Great Banquet. It is noteworthy that in describing Jesus’ telling of the parable, Luke characterizes his response to the dinner guest’s comment about eating in the kingdom of God with, “***But*** *Jesus said to him…*” Not “***so*** *Jesus said to him*”, not “***therefore*** *Jesus said to him*”, but “***but*** *Jesus said to him*”. As you have heard me say before, take note of the buts in the text, and this is a big BUT. For in those three little letters is a tone of correction, of chastisement, of disapproval. What could be so wrong with the dinner guest’s words of blessing for those who will eat bread in the kingdom of God? Perhaps the answer is in the parable itself.

The parable is about a banquet to which many are invited; the host prepares for them all. He hears no word from any of the invitees until he sends his servant to let them know that all is ready. “*Come, eat, drink, and celebrate with us, for all is now ready*!” But instead of a flood of excited, hungry guests stampeding toward his home, a cacophony of excuses rain down. In a song popularized by the Medical Mission Sisters the refrain captures their response:

*I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don’t trouble me now,*

*I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow,*

*I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum,*

*Pray hold me excused, I cannot come.*

They are lame excuses, offered by lame friends at the last minute. The invitation of the host who has prepared everything for them and made them honored guests is roundly rejected with excuses that suggest they never really wanted to come anyway – they are too busy with business or busyness to make time for him and his feast. Suddenly the host who has prepared all the food and drink for the banquet has no guests with whom to share it!

So, the host extends an invitation to those who live at the margins of society – the street people, the poor and lame, the crippled and blind, those who would not ordinarily be invited to the table of any well-respected man of the community. They are invited to come, sit at table with him, and share his banquet. And when they have arrived and there is still room at the table, the host sends his servant back out to the more distant byways to bring in more strangers to celebrate with him. He doesn’t invite them to come to the back door and get a meal; he doesn’t send the food to them to be eaten on the side of the road. He invites them all to his table, to sit with him, and eat and drink with him, and talk with him, and celebrate with him. They will be his honored guests without any judgment about their fitness to be there, no demand that they first bathe and change clothes, for many have no clothes to change into. There is only a gracious invitation to them, “Come as you are!”

Luke doesn’t tell us what the response of the Pharisees was, but one can imagine. The assumption of the dinner guest in his statement was that the Pharisees alone were worthy to eat bread in the kingdom of God. With his parable, Jesus suggests they have refused the invitation to that table by their own self-righteous, judgmental actions. And those who will be blessed in the kingdom are those with whom Jesus has been eating, those among whom he has been ministering, those who the Pharisees would have nothing to do with, but whom Jesus welcomed.

The table to which Jesus invites us, the heavenly table which God promises us, is a table at which there is a place for everyone. It is a table at which the rich and famous may be slow to gather and the self-righteously religious may take a pass because they don’t like the others who are invited. But the divine host invites them anyway and has made room for more. There is room here for the poor and the sick, the stranger and the refugee, the saint and the sinner alike. It is the table to which you are invited, the table of the family of God! You may not like some of the folks who are sitting there – and they may not like you all that much either – but you are called to love them anyway, to come and sit with them anyway, to make them feel welcome anyway, to make room for them as others make room for you. For, we sit at that table solely by the grace of God and there we are blessed! God extends that invitation to all God’s children, including you and me and the neighbor you are not so sure about. And the only lingering question is: will you come? Amen

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdman’s: Grand Rapids, 2007, p.200 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)