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Lessons in Luke: A Seat for Everyone

Luke 14:15-24

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I have some great memories of birthday parties as a little boy. My mom would allow me to pick the theme of the party and then invite my friends to join in the fun. I can remember a pirate themed party in which we all dressed up as pirates with eye patches and swords. There was a treasure hunt, and games like walk the plank and pin the tail on the parrot. I also remember a baseball themed party in which we all dressed up in our baseball gear and played a nine-inning game of whiffle ball, complete with hot dogs and Cracker Jacks. One particular year I remember having a dream the night before my birthday party. In my dream the time for the party came, but none of my friends arrived. Not one. I awoke in tears, and didn't really get over the awful feeling of that nightmare until the next day when my friends began to arrive at the party.

As we continue our journey through Luke's Gospel, Jesus is going to tell a story – a parable – about a man who throws a party, and nobody shows. It's a story with a sharp point for those to whom Jesus originally told it, but it also has some important things to say to us.

Before I read today's text, let me set it into the larger context of Luke's Gospel. An important religious leader invited Jesus to dinner at his home on the Sabbath. While there, Jesus healed a man with swollen limbs. The religious leaders were offended that Jesus both touched a sick man and that he healed him on the Sabbath. To which Jesus replied that if they had a cow who'd fallen into a hole on the Sabbath they'd certainly pull the animal out...which was Jesus' not-so-subtle way of accusing these religious stuffed-shirts that they cared more for cattle than people.

But Jesus wasn't done with them yet. He then gave them a lecture on humility and said that the next time they hold a banquet they shouldn't invite their rich family and friends, but the poor, the blind and lame. Then, Jesus says, they'll be rewarded at the

resurrection. Well, you can imagine how that raises the temperature in the room. And that's where our text today picks things up. Let's read it together.

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, "What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God!"

Jesus replied with this story: "A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, 'Come, the banquet is ready.' But they all began making excuses. One said, 'I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

"The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.'"

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Jesus has just told a parable. He told lots of them and used them to teach people. The word "parable" literally means "to throw alongside." In other words, a parable takes something that people are familiar with – in this case a banquet – and uses it to reveal something that people are not familiar with – in this case, the Kingdom of God. And the beauty of parables is that they are expansive. They can communicate different things to different people in different circumstances. For instance, to the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this story, the parable reinforces the idea that in the Kingdom of God the poor, blind and lame are deeply valued, even if the Pharisees don't value them. To Luke's broader first century audience, the parable is probably saying that while many of the religious leaders rejected the invitation to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, God has extended the invitation to the Gentiles.

But, of course, the real question is, what is this parable

saying to us? Let me suggest three things.

First, there's a place at the table for everyone. A banquet was a common biblical metaphor for the Kingdom of God. It represents the abundant life that God offers to all people through Jesus, both now and forever. One of the dominant features of the parable that Jesus tells is the host's passionate desire to have a full house. He wants people at the table, and so he invites everyone...no exceptions. And that's a reflection of God's heart. God invites everyone to experience full and abundant life...the rich and the poor...the healthy and the sick...the young and the not-so-young...saints and sinners. Every color, every creed, every ethnicity, every sexual identity and expression. All are invited.

I can't tell you how many wedding couples I've worked with who have agonized over the guest list. They can only afford to feed so many people, or the venue can only hold so many people. And so the couple struggles to decide who to invite. The process is fraught with family politics and high drama. And I wonder if some of us don't think about God's Kingdom that way. That only some are welcome. That there is only so much room in God's Kingdom or only so much love and grace to go around. But Jesus' parable blows that notion out of the water. There's room and food enough for everyone, and so everyone is invited. And that includes you, no matter who you are.

Second, we often spoil our appetite. My mother used to constantly warn me about eating before dinner. "You'll spoil your appetite," she would say. And she was right. I'd eat a snack late in the afternoon and by the time dinner came around, I wasn't hungry. And I still do it! Sit me down at a Mexican restaurant when I'm hungry and I'll eat so much chips and salsa that I'm not hungry when my burrito comes. Or worse, take me to Red Lobster and I'll put away so many cheddar bay biscuits that they might as well put my entree straight into a to-go box. Been there?

And we tend to do the same thing spiritually. In the parable that Jesus tells, the excuses that the original guests give for why they can't attend the banquet are all ridiculous. Banquets in the first century were a big deal. It was one of the few experiences of abundance that most people ever enjoyed. No one in their right mind would offer lame excuses for why they couldn't attend a banquet. But they did in Jesus' parable. They allowed the common experiences of daily life to miss the extraordinary experience of a banquet. But did you notice who did accept the invitation? The blind and

the lame. The homeless and the helpless. Those who welcomed the invitation because they were hungry – not just in their bellies but in their souls.

I wonder how often we're like those initial guests in the parable. We allow the things of this world to dull our spiritual appetite. We mistake the temporary rush of buying something new for true fulfillment. We confuse status or achievement for deep soul satisfaction and significance. We allow comfort to take the place of real peace, and savings to displace true security.

Jesus once put it this way, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade for your soul?"

The invitation to the banquet is for all people, but only those who are hungry, whose appetites are not dulled, are really interested in attending, and so sadly they are the only ones who are truly fed.

Finally, like the servant in the parable, we are called to invite others to the banquet. Just as the host sent his servant out into the streets and alleys and country lanes to invite people to the banquet, Jesus has sent us out into our neighborhoods, schools, senior complexes and communities to invite people to the table to God's grace. He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). He said, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation" (Mark 16:15). He said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

We call that "evangelism," and you do it all the time. The word evangelism literally means "good news," and you and I share good news all the time. We eat at a fabulous restaurant and we tell others about it. We see a great movie or read a great book and we tell others about it. We travel somewhere spectacular and we tell others about it. But statistics show that most of us don't share the Good News about Jesus. We don't tell people about the feast of abundant life, of peace and hope that feeds our souls. We don't invite them to join us in the feast.

Friends, I think YOU are the best kept secret in the south metro. You, Prince of Peace. This is the most dynamic, gifted, loving, faithful and servant-minded church I've ever been part of. This place, this faith

community, is a feast for the soul. God is our host, and God has set the table of this church richly and abundantly, and we are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to invite people to the table. Will some decline our invitation? Of course they will. Even Jesus didn't bat a thousand! But if we don't invite people to the feast, spiritually hungry people will remain spiritually unfed. And God, like the host in the parable, wants every seat at the table full.

So ask yourself, "What keeps me from sharing the Good News about Jesus and the feast of abundant life?" Be honest with yourself. And then look for an opportunity to extend an invitation. Invite them to worship with you next weekend, or at least invite them to tune into our online service. Because all around you there are spiritually hungry people, people hungry for love and forgiveness and hope. The very things that abound at the table of this faith community. And often the only thing standing between them and their seat at the table is an invitation from you.