

JESUS THEN AND NOW: HIS PROMISE

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Isaiah 25:6-9
Luke 22:27-30

Jesus is enjoying yet another fine meal, this time at the home of a prominent religious leader. The conversation is focused on two of his favorite topics: food and parties. Jesus has just made the rather outrageous point that, if you really want to be blessed by God, the guest lists for your parties shouldn't include your well-heeled friends. They should instead include people who are poor, crippled and blind. Why? Because people who are social outcasts can't repay you. Your reward for entertaining them will come when your earthly life is over.

Someone at the table responds, "Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15).

Everyone at the table knew about "the feast in the kingdom of God." The man was making reference to an old movie that was familiar to all good Jews. More than seven hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah cast a vision of a great banquet. In Isaiah's vision, the banquet takes place on God's holy mountain. History has run its course – time has come to an end – and the Lord is celebrating his great victory by throwing a huge dinner party. He, the Lord, is the one who prepares the lavish meal. The food he serves is fit for kings. And his guests include people from every nation on earth. As they feast at the great table, the Lord fulfills his great promise of redemption. He does away with death. He wipes away all tears. And he removes all guilt and shame.

Over time, many in Israel come to associate the Lord of the Banquet with the promised Messiah. "The feast in the kingdom of God" is understood to be the Messiah's victory celebration. It's a giant party that has yet to occur. And only the Messiah – the Christ – knows for sure who will be on the guest list.

When the unnamed man blurts out, "Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God," he's really challenging Jesus to express his views on the topic. The Pharisees who are present probably expect Jesus to say something like this: "We should all strive to be perfectly obedient to God's law. That way, when the day of the great feast arrives, we'll be counted worthy to join the Messiah at his table."

Instead, Jesus responds by telling a parable about the Great Banquet. And as we might expect, Jesus' parable contains a subversive message. It contains a message about the Great Banquet that no doubt offends virtually every good Jew at the table. It seems to suggest that the Messiah will be rejected by his own people, and that his grace and mercy will extend to Gentiles who live outside the covenant community and are ritually unclean.

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests."
- Luke 14:16

Jesus' listeners understand that the certain man is the Messiah, but of course most of them don't understand that he, Jesus, is the Messiah. Nor do they understand that the guests have already been invited and the banquet has already begun. But more about that in a minute.

The whole day has been devoted to getting ready for the banquet. The animals have been slaughtered, the crepe paper has been strung, the balloons have been taped to the walls, the sauces are simmering, and it's time to eat. So the banquet-holder tells his servant to summon those who have been invited.

The next part of the parable is confusing. People offer a variety of excuses about why they can't come. The excuses seem pretty lame.

One person says, "I've just bought a piece of land and I have to go check it out." We wonder: What kind of a fool first pays for a plot of ground and then goes and inspects it?

Another says, "I've just bought five pair of oxen that I'm going to use in my fields and I have to try them out." We wonder: Who in their right mind would make such a huge investment without first testing the animals in the field?

A third says, "I've just gotten married so I can't come." New Testament scholar Ken Bailey points out that, in the context of Middle Eastern culture, the man's reference to the marriage bed is obscene and shameful. In giving his excuse, Bailey argues, the man is being intentionally crass. Basically he's saying: "I've got a woman in the back of the house and I'm going to be busy with her all night."

What's clear to the people listening to Jesus tell the parable that maybe isn't so clear to us is that all of the invitees are going out of their way to insult the Master. They're offering him excuses that are completely implausible and obviously made up. Their not-so-veiled message is: "We don't have the slightest interest in coming to your pathetic party. We have nothing but contempt for you. And to prove it we're going to shut down your banquet."

The Master is justifiably angry. He has invested a lot of time and money in a party that his so-called friends are trying to sabotage. More than that, he has also been insulted in the worst possible way. What will the master do with his anger?

Amazingly, and inexplicably, the master's anger is transformed, and his response becomes gracious. Instead of retaliating, and instead of canceling the banquet, he instructs his servant to go into the city streets and bring in the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame.

The servant complies. He extends the Master's invitation to town's outcasts. The people enter the banquet hall, but the servant notices that many of the seats are still empty. He's energized and excited by the work he has done:

"Master," (he says), "there's still room for more."

The master replies:

"Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full."

- Luke 14:22, 23

We should be careful in the way we interpret this verse. Over the centuries, Christians have used the master's instructions about compelling people to come to justify violent actions against the church's enemies. Saint Augustine of North Africa cited it when he urged the Latin military to force the Donatist churches into the Latin fold. The Spanish Inquisition used the verse to justify the torture of perceived heretics.

The Master isn't instructing his servant to forcibly drag people to the banquet hall. He knows that the strangers on the highway probably aren't going to feel comfortable entering a nobleman's house. As outsiders who have zero social standing, they're going to feel uncomfortable in the company of the great. They're going to doubt if they really are welcome and wanted at the feast.

So the Master is instructing his servant to be passionate and persistent when he issues the invitation. He must do everything he can to convince the people that they're welcome, regardless of their background. If they refuse to walk through the doorway, he must extend the hand of friendship and try to lead them in.

What is Jesus saying through the parable? The messages are different, depending on your perspective. I don't mean that the message is squishy, and subject to multiple interpretations. I mean that Jesus word to us varies depending on who we are. Let's think now about what the Lord's message might be first to those who are sitting at the table with him, second to the outsiders who don't know him, and third, to the individual people and the churches that are seeking to be faithful to him.

We get some idea of where the religious leaders are coming from when we look at the Jewish writings about the Great Banquet first prophesied by Isaiah. The second-century B.C. book of *Enoch* isn't a part of the Hebrew Scriptures, but was influential in Israel's spiritual life. *Enoch* refers to a great banquet with the Messiah and it affirms, with Isaiah, that the Gentiles will be included in the banquet. But *Enoch* goes on to say that the angel of death will be present and will use his sword to slay every one of those filthy Gentiles. That obviously contradicts Isaiah's idea that the Gentiles will be welcomed to the Lord's table.

The Qumran community was active during the same period when *Enoch* was written. Qumran was the source of the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of the Qumran scrolls is called "The Messianic Rule." The scroll discusses the Great Banquet and insists that no Gentiles will be present. The only people at the table will be pious and law-abiding Jews who are physically fit. No one can attend the banquet, the text says, who is "smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind or deaf or dumb" ("The Messianic Rule (IQSa 2:5-10)," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 121).

The religious leaders who are sitting at the table with Jesus probably share these biases. They believe the promised Messiah is coming to save Israel and Israel alone. They believe God's greatest blessings are reserved for those who are part of the covenant community. And they believe Lord receives into his holy presence only those who are ritually pure.

Jesus' message to them is that they're wrong on all three counts. He – the Messiah – God's only begotten Son – has come to save all people, not just Israel. God freely blesses all who receive his Son. And God has a special place in his heart for those who suffer physically, and those who experience poverty, rejection and failure.

Some of us are more like the Pharisees who are sitting with Jesus than we'd like to admit. We think of ourselves as disciples, but in reality, we want to meet Jesus on our own terms. We think that because we come to worship, and volunteer our time, and give our money, we're intimate with Jesus. But in reality, we're spectators, and armchair critics.

And we've got all kinds of excuses as to why a hard core commitment just isn't possible for us. "My career is too demanding." "The Bible is too hard to understand." "I had a bad experience in church as a kid and don't want to relive it."

Jesus parable illustrates why it doesn't work to say to him: "Not yet" or "Let me get back to you on that" or "Maybe I'll stop by for drinks and hors d'oeuvres." When the Lord of the universe invites us into his presence, and offers to feed us from his table, any excuse we offer for not showing up amounts to an insult. As Thomas Fuller once observed, "Bad excuses are worse than none."

A rabbi tells the story of a time when he was flying internationally. After he settled into his seat, the flight attendant asked him, "Will you be having dinner tonight?"

“What are my choices?” the rabbi wanted to know.

“Yes or no,” came the reply.

Christ invites us, right now, to experience fellowship with him. He offers us bread to satisfy our deepest hunger and living water to renew our spirit. Many of us have received the invitation, but we’re not ready to commit ourselves. We want choices. We want to be able to put off our decision as long as possible. We want to be able to sit and eat with Jesus when we need him, or when we happen to feel close to him.

The message of the parable for those of us who are sitting at the table with Jesus is that we have only two choices. We can say yes. Or we can say no.

What’s the message to those outsiders? What is Jesus saying to the hundreds of millions of people who don’t know him? Of course he’s inviting them to join him at the table in the Great Banquet in the Last Days. But there’s more here. Jesus’ isn’t just opening the door to what Chesterton called the Inn and the End of the World. He’s also inviting people to feast with him today. The preparations have been made, the meal is on the table, and Christ longs share it with us.

We’ve become a nation of foodies. I don’t quite get it, but one of the most popular channels on cable is the Food Network. My brother, who doesn’t really cook, loves to plant himself in front of the TV and watch other people cook. I love to eat, but I realize that, compared to many of my friends, my palate is unrefined. As far as I’m concerned, the four essential food groups are: Fast, Frozen, Instant, and Chocolate. My favorite food is seconds.

Jesus is a foodie. He spends hours and hours eating with people of all kinds. He performs his first miracle at a wedding banquet. The wine runs out, and he fills six 20 gallon vessels with the highest quality wine anyone has ever tasted. His most famous miracle – the only one recorded in all four gospels – is the feeding of the 5000.

By providing food, Jesus shows that he’s bringing God’s reign to earth. He also points ahead to the Great Banquet where God’s abundant blessings will be on full display. He’s the bread that nourishes our spirits even when our bellies are empty. He’s the fountain that flows inside us even when we’re stuck in the desert.

Jesus’ final act with his disciples before his crucifixion is to share a simple meal of bread and wine. He instructs them to eat the meal regularly after his physical departure. By eating the bread, the sign of his body, and by drinking the wine, the sign of his lifeblood, his followers express their unity in him and their dependence on him.

Even after his resurrection Jesus eats with his disciples as if to point them once again to the final banquet. Mark tells only one story in which the resurrected Lord appears to the disciples. And what are doing when he shows up? Of course they’re eating.

In Luke’s last resurrection story, Jesus helps to dispel the disciples’ doubts by eating a piece of broiled fish.

And in John’s last resurrection story, Jesus is having a breakfast of fish with the disciples by the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus eats with his anxious disciples to remind them that he's ever-present. "I am with you always," he says at the end of Matthew, "to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus speaks with gentleness and compassion to those who don't know him. The message of the parable is reinforced at every meal Jesus ever enjoyed. All are welcome at his table. All who hunger for his goodness and mercy are invited to the feast.

Finally, what is Jesus saying to the individual people and the churches that are seeking to be faithful to him? What is he saying to us as a congregation?

First, let's be clear about who we are, and where we stand in the parable. Those of us who love and serve Jesus are represented by the servant. We're the guy the Master is relying on to make the banquet a success. It's our job to head down the roads and country lanes in search of anyone who will come and fill a seat. Someday we'll also be invited to sit at the table, rest our weary bones, and enjoy the banquet. But right now the Lord has stationed us outside the hall, and he needs for us to be alert, and on the move.

Too many of us have the idea that it's someone else's job to fill the hall, and it's someone else's job to serve the food. We're supportive of the church always ready with a word of encouragement for our insider friends. And we'd love to see the empty pews filled every Sunday morning. But we don't feel equipped to leave the comfort zone of our church family and go and go in search of the needy. Or maybe it's just that there's no room in our schedule for that kind of work.

How do you think the servant reacted when the Master sent him out to gather in the outcasts? I doubt if he put on a smile and said, "Wow, I'd love to help you with that!" He probably thought to himself: "If you love the poor and the blind and the lame so much, why don't you go get them?"

But notice what happens to the servant when he brings back that first crop of broken people. He suddenly gets excited about the work. He sees all the empty seats in the banquet hall and says, "Master, there's more work to do. Send me out again. Let's do whatever it takes, and go wherever we need to go, to fill those seats."

God's vision for LCPC is that we would get excited about leaving our comfort zone, and reaching out to the lost and the broken, and filling every empty seat in this sanctuary. There will be plenty of time for feasting in the great new day that's coming. But until that day comes, may we do everything we can to be Christ's ambassadors, especially in the places where we live and work.

As one elder at this church keeps reminding us, we've got a table set for a thousand but only a fraction of that number at the table.