

## “Your Table is Ready”

Luke 14:15-24

*Sermon Series: Kingdom Come. Week 5 Serve the Outsider*

*The Parable of the Great Feast*

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My mother’s maiden name is Goomrigian. It was probably mispronounced more than Hoglund. It’s easy for Armenians but not so much for Americans. I never knew her father, my grandfather, Leon Goomrigian. He died when my Mom was eleven. By all accounts, he had a great sense of humor. I imagine, over the years, he got sick of hearing people butcher his name. Teachers stumbled over it. His dental patients couldn’t pronounce it. Finally he figured a way around it. Leon would make a reservation for dinner. The family waited in the lobby. Finally when the *maître d* called out “Smith party your table is ready” he’d say, “Come on. That’s us.”

There is a mystical connection between eating and worshiping. Both are essential for life. Food nourishes the body. Prayer and praise restore the soul. Both activities strengthen family bonds and build close friendships. All the significant moments of my life included a meal. I can picture the restaurant on the night I asked Lisa to marry me. The reception at our wedding was magnificent. We shared a delicious dinner in each hospital when our children were born and at the receptions after their weddings. And I can never forget the meals we ate after the funerals for Lisa’s Mom, her Dad, and my Dad. What’s more, each memorable meal also included a worship service or, at least, a prayer. There is an essential connection between praise and passing the bread.

Jesus loved to eat. You’ve heard me say Jesus *ate* His way through the Gospels. What is Satan’s first temptation in the desert? Make bread out of stones. What’s Jesus’ first miracle? Making more wine at the wedding in Cana. What does Peter’s mother-in-law do after Jesus heals her? Get up and make them supper. What is the only miracle performed by Jesus in all four Gospels? The feeding of the five thousand. And what does the Lord do the night before He died? Eat the Last Supper. Actually it’s not the *Last* Supper. After the resurrection, He has supper in Emmaus (Luke 24:13-34). This is history’s first fast food. The minute the food is delivered, *poof!* Jesus is gone. When He appears to the disciples back in Jerusalem the same night what does He ask? “Do you have anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41). After all, he didn’t get to eat in Emmaus. Later, on the shore of Galilee, do the disciples find Jesus preaching? No, He’s cooking breakfast (John 21:1-14). All this eating proves one thing: Jesus must have been Presbyterian.

Perhaps this is why Jesus describes heaven as a party, a wedding reception, a celebration filled with food and joy. Both the Old and New Testaments and many Jews in Jesus’ time looked forward to a great banquet at the end of this world and the beginning of the next. The Messiah or Christ will host a wonderful feast. Yet Jews disagree over who is invited to the heavenly reception. Many believe only Jews will receive an invitation. Some think only the most pious Jews will get in. Those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls think it will be an exclusive party for perfect people. They teach that nobody who is “smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf,

or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish” will be allowed in. All Gentiles are obviously excluded and, along with them, all imperfect Jews.<sup>1</sup>

A group of Pharisees want to see who Jesus thinks will be on the guest list for the Messiah’s great banquet. At a dinner party a guest exclaims, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). What this Pharisee means is, “Whoever is invited to the Messiah’s feast will be blessed! The food will be free, our enemies will be defeated and death will be gone forever.” At this moment, I imagine all eyes turn to Jesus to see what He will say. He tells a parable.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready” (Luke 14:16-17).

This feast is the social event of the year. Invitations went out and everyone accepted. Now the dishes are ready, the fattened calf killed and grilled, the banquet hall set, but when the servants sound the dinner bell, to their surprise, all the guests who previously accepted the invitation make excuses and back out. They seem like good reasons.

Look a little closer. “The first said, ‘I have just bought a field and I must go and see it. Please excuse me’” (v. 18). This real estate speculator claims he must check out a field he recently acquired. Yet in the Middle East, no one buys land without carefully examining every inch before the sale. If you buy a house online without inspecting it you might wind up with alligator infested swampland in Florida. He is simply making an excuse. The second guest explains, “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me” (v. 19). This is comparable to a man calling his wife and saying, “Honey, I won’t be home for dinner, I just bought five used cars online and now I’m going down to the lot to find out their age, make, model and if they start.” Even the most devoted wife would question her husband’s sanity. Another poor excuse. The third guest literally says, “I’m married so I can’t come” (v. 20). Either the man is a hen-pecked husband or, more likely, he’s using his wife as an excuse to avoid the meal.

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry” (v. 21). Who can blame him? Imagine if you prepared a Thanksgiving dinner or wedding reception and no one who RSVP’d showed up. Well that might happen this year. Those at the dinner with Jesus are shocked at such insulting lies and lame excuses. Why would anyone miss such a joyous occasion? Why would anyone turn down a sumptuous banquet? Why would anyone insult this generous host? Why?

What the diners at the party do not realize is they *are* eating with the Messiah. The heavenly feast they all long for is happening at that moment and they are missing it. The Christ is a guest at their table and they can’t see him. Through this simple story, Jesus tells them, “Your table is ready. The great feast is here and now. Why do you refuse my invitation? Why do you reject me? Why do you make excuses?”

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, Eerdmans, co. 1980, p. 90.

These are the very questions Jesus asks us. ‘Why won’t you spend time with me? I invite you to share my joy. I long to be with you. I want to commune with you in worship, to talk with you in prayer and through the Bible. I want to walk with you throughout the day, to support you through other believers. I can fill you with love, peace and strength. I want to make your life as joyful as a feast. But you hand me excuses.’ I don’t have the time. Gee I’d like to come, but I can’t arrange it. It just didn’t work out, maybe next time. I need my rest. I’m so swamped. I have more important things to do.

Friends, those are the excuses you and I make for not spending time with God. We invest more time, money and energy to improve our external appearance, which wastes away, than to take care of our internal spirit which lasts for eternity. Now Jesus does not want you to feel guilty. Nor does He want excuses. He invites you to share a joyous time with Him. He longs to feed and nourish your spirit. He offers you power to face each day and peace beyond understanding. It is foolish to miss this invitation.

If we refuse to come to the party, He simply issues new invitations. After the first guests refuse, the Master invites the poor, homeless, and handicapped. Since there is still room in the hall he dispatches his servants in a wider circle to bring in the Gentiles who live outside the walls. The host wants a full house for his celebration. The very people cut from the guest list by Jesus’ critics - the physically impaired, the spiritually imperfect, the racially impure - are the ones who enjoy the great feast. Only the excuse makers who feel they are too perfect, pure or pious miss Jesus’ party.

When Jesus invites you to His banquet, He always says, “Come as you are.” You don’t need to be a certain age or race, to be strong, beautiful, tall, rich or smart. Perfection is not required. Just lay down your excuses and come to the party. In the third world, people are accepting Jesus’ invitation to the banquet by the thousands. They worship for hours in simple churches often under the threat of persecution. They are overjoyed to sit at Jesus’ table. At the same time, we in the West with all our churches, ministers and Bibles are spiritually starving to death. We are missing the party. The joy of heaven starts now and you’re invited. Here are four ways to accept Jesus’ invitation.

**Drop the Excuses and Make Time for God** Woodside is opening every possible option to help you worship God – three services, in person, online, live and recorded. Next week we plan to start Higher Ground. There are traditional growth groups and microgroups, in person, inside, outside and on zoom. You have time at home to pray and read God’s Word. You can do Faithful Families and Youth Groups during the week. The only thing preventing you from receiving the love, joy and peace of the Lord is an excuse. Make time each day and each week for God.

**Widen Your Circle** Jesus is always inclusive. He eats with men and women, tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees. Everyone is invited to His party. How wide is your circle of friends? One thing I am learning during our conversations about racism is my circle needs to widen and include people not like me. Revelation 7 says in heaven there will be “a great multitude...from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). If we want to start living

heaven now, if we want a church that looks like heaven, we need to widen our circle. Make friendships with people who are not like you.

**Invite Outsiders In** Jesus does not want us to keep the party to ourselves. He sends us to invite everyone in so His house will be full. Why do we invite people to follow Jesus with us? Not to prove we are right. Now to tell them they are wrong. We want them to know the joy of heaven now. We don't want them to miss Jesus' party.

**Feed the Hungry** I started this sermon by saying Jesus ate His way through the Gospels. Meals are a great way for Him to share the Good News. Yet Jesus is also concerned with feeding hungry people. When the Covid shut down came, many hunkered down in their homes and focused on just getting by. At the same time, Woodside families reached out to feed hungry neighbors. Our Dinner Ministry started providing drive through meals. Several families filled brown bagged lunches so our homeless neighbors could have a hot dinner and a lunch the next day. Woodsiders provided lunches every Friday through the summer, ran food collections in their neighborhoods, stocked local pantry shelves and distributed meals twice a month with the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen.

Woodside is all about feeding physical and spiritual hunger. Your generous gifts make this possible. We can't do it without you. When you grow in your giving we can do even more for those in need. Please use the enclosed card to make a pledge to God's work at Woodside in 2021. You can fill it out and make your commitment today. Normally, after making our pledges on Celebration Sunday, we serve you a delicious brunch. Some people wait all year from the Crème Brulee French Toast. For obvious reasons we can't serve you a meal this year. So we decided to do something different with those funds. We are giving them to Urban Promise Trenton. For every pledge we receive by today we'll donate \$10 to Urban Promise Trenton which helps inner city kids receive faith, hope and a future. We want to invite them to Jesus' table. We want them to start living heaven now.

Jesus is calling your name. Your table is ready. Don't miss the party.