

Invited To The Feast
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 35:3-10, 1 Chronicles 16:23-34, Luke 14:1-24

Today's Gospel reading comes from Luke 14:1-24. Listen now to God's word. "One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" And they had nothing to say. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." Jesus replied: "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.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

What's your idea of a great party? Maybe it's getting together with the neighbors on Labor Day and having a huge picnic. It might be inviting every person you've ever met to a hall filled with dancing and music and food. Or it might be having a small gathering of close friends to your house for cards and small talk. Everybody's got their perfect party. And each party has its own house rules...what to wear, how to act. The kind of party dictates what's expected. I heard once about a letter that a young boy wrote to his friend. It went something like this: "Dear Michael – my mom wrote you a note last week inviting you to my birthday party. She said that gifts were optional. She was wrong. See you Saturday with my present, Bobby." Now Bobby knew the rules for his party!

Today's passage tells us about a party Jesus attended – one held by a prominent Pharisee. Now ancient Jewish culture was based on honor and shame, and you didn't invite people to your home just for fun. A feast or a banquet or a wedding was a way that you established your personal honor and social status; you only invited people who were your equals or greater in social standing. Status was based on all sorts of things...wealth, age, social prominence, religious affiliations, you name it. At every feast, each seat had significance in terms of honor, and it was complicated to figure out where you should sit. Sit in too low a spot, and you could dishonor yourself. On the other hand, if you picked too important a seat, you might lose that seat to someone more important – again, a dishonor. It was a complex system that established who the authorities in the room really were. There was also the expectation of payback – if I feed you and invite you to my feast, eventually you're going to need to repay the debt.

At this party, there's a bunch of Pharisees vying for attention and prestige amongst each other. Then there's Jesus, this radical rabbi who's been traveling the country, embarrassing the Pharisees at every turn. They're itching to discredit Him. All of a sudden, a man with dropsy shows up, probably hoping that Jesus will heal him. Dropsy is a medical condition where your extremities fill with fluid; we call it edema now. It's caused by organs that are starting to fail. And the problem is, the condition makes you incredibly thirsty, but the water you drink just makes the condition worse until eventually your organs can't take any more.

The irony is, this man's physical problem is the same as the Pharisee's spiritual problem. This guy drinks and drinks and drinks but is never satisfied, and the water he's drinking is slowly killing him. In the same way, the Pharisees looked righteous on the outside, but as Luke has shown us in the past, their hearts were filled with a lust for power and authority and material gain. Their desires aren't ever fulfilled, and their greed is killing them spiritually.

Jesus wants to heal the man, just like He wants to heal the Pharisees of their spiritual disease, and so He does. But first He asks all of them if there's a problem with what He's doing. None of them says a word. They know that while some rabbis taught it was unlawful, Scripture itself doesn't forbid healing on the Sabbath day. It's the kind of thing they would love to challenge, but they know they can't. This whole event brings the dinner to a standstill because Jesus has suddenly become *the* authority figure in the room. He's changing the power structure this party is all about, and He's just getting started.

Then Jesus gives a piece of advice that makes perfect sense – at first. When going to a party, don't give yourself the seat of honor – somebody else might be coming who's more distinguished, and you don't want to be embarrassed when you have to give up your seat to them. This was sound advice; any rabbi would teach it. But then Jesus shocks the room. Instead of telling the guests that they should seek their proper seat of honor, Jesus says, "Take the lowest chair. Then when the host sees where you are, he'll get you to your proper spot." To us, this makes perfect sense too. But to Jesus' audience, this was unthinkable. To take the lowest position was to give up all your authority and to deny your status in front of everyone. This would have been considered demeaning, even insulting to the Pharisees. But Jesus insists that the person who humbles himself will be exalted, but those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Jesus totally changes the status quo.

But he's not done yet. Jesus tells the host that at his next dinner party, he shouldn't invite those who can pay him back. Instead, he should invite those that would normally be unwelcome – the poor, the lame, the blind, those who couldn't give him any social standing. Then his reward would be given by God at the resurrection of the dead, at judgment. Again, this is unheard of. Who would give a party without expectation of something in return? We might think that way now, but only because Jesus changed all the rules!

Imagine with me that the room is quiet. Everyone's shocked into silence. You all know the one guy in the room who has to break the ice? That guy's at this party too. He says, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." He's saying, that's a good idea, Jesus...but let's remember, *we're* the ones who will be eating at the feast in the Kingdom of God. We've got nothing to worry about – we Pharisees follow God's law, so we're all good!

Jesus' final parable takes that idea and shoots it down. He tells of a man who's invited lots of people to his banquet. He's sent out the invitations; everybody knows well in advance. The time finally arrives and he sends out his servants to tell people, "Dinner's ready!" But they all make excuses. They're too interested in themselves, their investments, their pleasures, to come to the banquet. This is *incredibly* dishonoring to the host...he's thrown a party and nobody shows up! So he tells his servants, go out and get everybody you can find to come to my banquet. Get the sick, the poor, the lame, and have them come. And when there's more room, he sends his servants out far from town to get anybody who'd be willing to attend. Nothing's going to spoil this party, even if those who were invited in the first place don't show up.

By this point, we can only guess how the Pharisees were reacting. If the lame and sick and poor were the ones who were invited second in the story, it meant that *they* were the people in the story who made excuses rather than coming to the banquet. They had a chance, but now their seats were taken by people they considered unworthy. Jesus' story makes the Pharisees think...are we too proud to come to God's table? Each one had to search himself for the answer.

OK, so Jesus upended the social order in His own day and seems to be offering the Kingdom of God to anyone who would accept the invitation. But what is He saying to us today about Himself and about entering the Kingdom of God? There are a couple of thoughts that are running through this passage. One is the invitation to the feast. It's a metaphor for being welcomed into the Kingdom of God. The other is the concept of humility. If we explore these two ideas, we can see what God is saying to us today.

First, we are invited to the feast. All of us – young, old, rich, poor, those who've lived superb lives and those whose lives have been wasted, tall, short, black, white, Republican, Democrat, Indian and Asian and European and South American, handsome, homely, smart, academically challenged, all of us – are welcomed to come. It goes against every expectation. None of us here are expecting dinner invitations to the White House. None of us is going to go to the next Academy Awards. We pay close to a hundred dollars a ticket just to go to a concert where we never even get to meet the musicians personally! Some of us here may have connections here and there, but most of us are very average. We aren't important in the global scheme of things, at least as far as the world is concerned.

But God has a different perspective. God is throwing a party, and there's nobody left off the invitation list. The God of the universe, the creator of everything; His Son, Jesus, the one who sacrificed everything that we might be able to come to the celebration; the Holy Spirit who works in our world to change us and make us holy; they want us all there. We don't have to be famous or special. God cares about each one of us, and His desire is for us to come to Him. And unlike those parties in the first century, God doesn't demand payback. We *can't* pay Him back – there's no way for us to repay Him – but He doesn't expect that. All we have to do is accept the invitation and come with thanksgiving.

So how does humility fit into all of this? We've talked a lot about repentance in the past as a key to saving faith and real relationship with God. When we repent, we turn from the sins and run in the opposite direction, into God's arms. But before we can really repent and come into relationship with God, we have to be humbled. *All* sins separate us from God and bring us under His judgment, but one sin *keeps* us separated from God, and that's pride. Pride is the sin that breaks the very first commandment that says, "You shall have no other gods before me." Pride is idolatry of the self, idolatry that says "My will be done" rather than "Thy will be done."

Tim Keller's the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. It reaches over 5,000 people that many thought were impossible to reach with the Gospel. In his book *The Reason For God*, he says this: "There are two forms of [pride]. One form is being very bad and breaking all the rules, and the other form is being very good and keeping all the rules and becoming self-righteous. There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. The first is by saying, "I am going to live my life the way *I* want." The second is [this]...if you are avoiding sin and living morally so that God will have to bless and save you, then ironically, you may be looking to Jesus as a teacher, model, and helper but you are avoiding Him as Savior. You are trusting in your own goodness rather than in Jesus for your standing with God. You are trying to save yourself by following Jesus. That, ironically, is a rejection of the Gospel of Jesus."

The first step towards Jesus is a realization that you need Him. That takes humility. It takes a lot for us to acknowledge that we are part of the outsiders who were invited in. In and of ourselves, we are lame from walking in the paths of sin and deaf to the cries for mercy and justice, blind to our own wickedness and poor in the ways of righteousness. In the passage from Isaiah 35 we heard this morning, we heard about the Way of Holiness, a way that's not open to the unclean and the unrighteous. We don't read that it's open to those who have purified themselves, though. It's open to two sets of people...the redeemed and the ransomed...the people who God Himself has purchased with His own blood. Until we humble ourselves and realize our own spiritual poverty and cry out to God for His redemption, we can't go to the feast – not because we're not invited, but because we're refusing the invitation.

At the church I attended in Lexington, I remember someone who'd been a member for a long time asking, "Why do I need to be saved? Saved from what?" She assumed that she was good enough that she didn't need salvation, that her own goodness was enough for God to be pleased with her, rather than realizing the darkness in her own heart and her need for God to change her from the inside out. She's not alone...all of us are tempted to trust in ourselves rather than God...but that pride will keep us out of the banquet God is preparing for us.

What does this kind of humility look like in the Christian life? It's leaving behind the self-centeredness that usually defines us. Again, let me quote from Tim Keller: "In Christ I could know I was accepted by grace not only despite my flaws, but because I was willing to admit them. The Christian gospel [says] that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time...I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less." This is the picture of the heart that's right with God – one that's stopped worrying about position and power and authority, but also one that stands sure in God. No job is beneath us, whether it's feeding the poor or building a house or caring for the sick or those in prison, because the ground is level at the foot of the cross. It's the humility that realizes that what this country's founding fathers said was truer than they realized...all human beings are created equal, at least in our standing with God. To Him, we are all desperate sinners for whom Christ died and to whom He now offers salvation.

This kind of humility realizes that our whole lives now belong to God and should be dedicated to God's will. At first, it seems like if God is asking to change our lives, He is asking for us to repay Him. But that's not it. When we truly know that God has saved us, transformation is what we want to happen, not because it's some assignment or duty God has assigned, but because it's a joy to please God, and it's a joy to become the people that God always intended us to be. Our true happiness, the kind that most of us spend all our lives searching for, can only be found once we're remade into the image of the God in whom we find real fulfillment. That humility says, "You know what? I'm messed up! I'm not who I need to be! I am the blind guy; I am the lame beggar, and I need God's salvation because I can't save myself." That humility says, "I repent because I know that my own way of living life my own way hasn't really worked." It's tough to say we were wrong. But that kind of humility is the start of being in true relationship with God.

We have been invited to the feast! God is preparing it even now and has sent out the invitations. Through Jesus Christ, anyone who turns to God in faith and repentance, humbling themselves before Him, can enter the door. Are you ready for His banquet?