

We read, throughout Luke – how Jesus seeks to draw in the reader – to draw in those who are hungry, hurt, alone, unclean – and provide for them food, healing, inclusion, and a welcome return for the lost.

No stories in Luke's gospel speak to this more than the parables. I love parables. Parables are equal amounts of frustrating, and intriguing. Parables lend themselves to asking questions and exploring, because in them Jesus rarely offers clear answers. More often than not, the audience, are left to ponder at all their possible meanings.

I also love parables because they are stories. And I don't know about you, but stories grab my imagination! They keep me engaged. Parables are wonderful little stories which Jesus uses to describe something, usually the Kingdom of God. Today let's explore Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet.

Our story today begins, abruptly, right after the scripture that was read. Jesus tells this story about a great banquet, while sitting around a table at another banquet. This is an important setting for understanding the multi-levels of this parable.

At the beginning of the chapter, we find Jesus participating in a Sabbath feast at the home of one of the Pharisees. This is important because the Pharisees were Jewish leaders who were very legalistic in their interpretation of scripture.

The poor Pharisees have been given a bad rap throughout the gospels. They've been portrayed as Jesus' nemeses. But just because they are legalistic doesn't mean that they're bad people. It just means that they look at scripture from a very particular point of view. Many of them were probably very well meaning ... hard-headed but well meaning.

That Jesus is eating with Pharisees is significant because they are the primary listeners to his teaching on this specific occasion.

So, after his practical teaching example of what is considered work on the sabbath. Jesus begins instructing people where they should sit when they are invited as a guest, suggesting that, rather than sitting at the place of honour, (the place reserved for a guest), it is more appropriate to sit in the lowliest seat, and then be invited to a higher ranking seat.

And then he says, instead of the rich, the poor, the sick, the down-and-outers should be invited – thus inferring that increasing social standing shouldn't be motivation for dinner-parties.

You see, in those days, and, dare I say even today – dinner parties were not always about fellowshiping around the table. They were sometimes done to promote one's cause – or even one's status in the community. Attending with proper etiquette was important, lest you not be invited again. Sometimes, invitations to meals were sent, so that they would be reciprocated, and one's social status could be increased.

Jesus turns this feast on its head and suggests inviting those who could not ever return the invitation. And so when, someone at the supper praises Jesus for these ideas, Jesus proceeds to tell this story...

There once was a dinner party, a great banquet, hosted by an important man. Now this wasn't just any dinner party it was a big one. We have a reference to this kind dinner party in Isaiah 25:6 We read:

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.

It sounds quite lavish and delicious. Rich food filled with marrow – well aged wines - I can imagine I can imagine fine cheeses, tender roasts, beautiful place settings and fancy plates. It's a hearty meal, a filling meal, a meal full of flavour that tantalizes your taste buds, a gourmet meal.

On the evening of the meal, when everything was coming together, a slave was sent out to chauffeur everyone to the banquet hall. But as the slave knocked on doors, people began to make excuses.

They needed to have a look at some land that they had already purchased, another said they'd just bought five yolks of oxen that wanted to be tried. Perhaps common equivalents would be to say, "I need to go look at the wheat" and "I just bought a combine and I want to take it for a spin." Finally another guest says I just got married, so I can't make it.

Like any host who has prepared a wonderful spread for guests, our host gets really angry with these excuse makers. Let's be honest, wouldn't you?

But instead of cancelling, instead of letting it all go to waste, the host does something radical. He says to his slave:

Go out into the streets and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. They may not appreciate the banquet in the way that these more 'well off' might have, but they will appreciate the dinner for what it is, a feast, good food - filled with fellowship.

These are the ones who won't care about social position, they won't care about getting ahead at this meal, for this meal will feed their body mind and soul. This meal may just be appreciated more than it was originally intended.

For those on the 'in' we may see this as wasting a great meal, and in some ways it is. And yet it also offers dignity to those who socially aren't seen as possessing any. This host is a generous host.

But the story isn't over.

The table isn't full; there's still heaps of food. So, the slave is ordered to go out again and compel, not just invite, but also to drag in everyone from the highways and the byways so that the house may be filled.

There is consequence for those who turn the invitation down. "None of those who were invited will taste the dinner."

Like any parable there are many ways to look at it. What I always like to do is look first at the characters. We have a host, a slave, and guests (both those who accept the invitation and those who turn it down). It seems simple enough.

The commonly accepted understanding of this parable is as such: The host is God who sets the banquet out for the invited, the Jewish people, Christ is the slave, the messenger sent out to call everyone in, but when those who are invited reject the offer, Christ is sent to those who are on the fringes, those who will appreciate the invitation, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame.

Those who rejected the invitation, well they're out, they've lost their chance.

We usually like to think that we're the ones who were sought out in those lowly places and invited and commanded even – to participate in a glorious feast!

Obviously, we have been sought out and found – forgiven and now are on our way to glory. But, what if we're actually more like the ones who were originally invited and we're the ones who may or may not turn down the invitation.

I hear each day from people the statement, "I'm just so busy." And it's true. I don't doubt you at all. We are a busy people. Whether it is commitments to sports teams, or to family activities, to social activities, there is lots on the go.

Busyness is the 'plight' of Western culture. And I find it amusing how the excuses that were used in this parable, are very similar to excuses we sometimes make to one another. I just bought a new house or a new section of land, and I want to look it over, I just got a new tractor, combine, car, truck and I want to drive it around. Even that line, I have just been married, sounds like it could be a similar excuse... Not only that but there's football and baseball, and grandchildren, and golf, new trucks, and hunting and fishing, and movies, and quilting, and warm places in winter.

All this busyness makes us tired. Are these busy – fill – up-every-space-with-things – times a way of saying that we don't really want don't want to come to the banquet? We'd rather check our crops?

Are we so busy and distracted by other options that we can't or don't want to or even ignore the great opportunities that are set before us?

One of the key messages I hear in this portion of scripture, and the scripture leading up to our parable, is one of humility. We all need to be mindful that there is always a danger of becoming prideful, that we have the answers...that we are entitled to be here at the head of the table.

When we feel that we have a mastery over God, when we feel like we've already received the invitation, when we feel like we have the right to say who's invited and who's not – and then don't bother to come because we don't like the other guests – well, then we've miss the point.

Friends, there is reason to be hopeful. When I listen to this story the invitation is not rescinded. The party is not over – it's never ended. There is still an open invitation to the banquet...even though you may have had an excuse before doesn't mean you're not still invited.

God's table is a table that continues to welcome new guests.

For those who will accept God's invitation, there is a rich, full meal prepared. Come, let us eat with the Lord!