

READING PARABLES IN A PANDEMIC: “THE GREAT BANQUET”

Luke 14:7-24

July 5, 2020

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A pair of parables about privilege and poverty. The first parable takes place in real life. Jesus attends a dinner party intended to impress him. Instead it serves as a contrast to the way of things in the kingdom of God. The second parable is a story told by Jesus that may or may not have happened in real life, but explains to his audience the ins and outs of banquets in God's world.

But maybe the first thing to notice about these two parables is that they are “gatherings.” We are not for the most part going to dinner parties these days. If the kingdom of God is really like a great gathering, a full house, then we face some serious challenges. Should we assume in the midst of this pandemic that we are far from the kingdom of God, that the banquet is off, and God has abandoned the world?

There is certainly a great of weariness in our isolation. Churches are asking how they'll survive this. Restaurants and businesses are closing their doors for good. So many not working and too few hiring. We're not seeing people smile, not exchanging handshakes and hugs. And we don't know how much longer this will go on.

If the invitation were to come today, our excuses would be different. We'd ask questions. Is it safe? What sort of precautions are being taken? Would we excuse ourselves because we belong to the class of vulnerable people? I know I'm being too literal about this, but if God's world is about people gathering, then what does that mean for us today?

Hold that question in your head while I talk about some of the details in these two stories. The opening scene of the first story actually begins before the portion I read. Jesus comes to the house of a Pharisee on the Sabbath for a meal where according to verse one, “they are watching him closely.” Why? Because there is a man with dropsy and they want to see if he will heal on the Sabbath. He does of course and offers an explanation that silences their objections even before they have a chance to make them. Then we come to our text that tells us how he noticed that the guests were choosing places of honor at the table. Jesus is not just being observed, but he is making his own observations and what he sees is that this meal is a gathering of the privileged competing for seats of honor. These are not subsistence farmers, the working class, beggars or the ostracized. These are Pharisees and lawyers, the privileged among the Jewish population. They are all about social status.

So he tells them this parable where one person chooses a seat of honor and is asked to move down while another chooses a more humble place and is asked to move up. If you must play this game, he says, choose the lower seat where you stand a greater chance of being honored before all. One commentator compares it to a game of chutes and ladders. You want to rise up the ladder not slide down the chute.

And then he turns to his host and criticizes him for inviting all these “worthy” people. He essentially tells him not to play this game of the privileged. Instead he should invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

I imagine some of us are a little sensitive about this label, the privileged, but it is what many of us are. I get to preach to you through the medium of the internet because this church has people capable of doing the technology. It’s a meaningful, spiritual experience for you in the safety of your home because we have talented musicians. I have a home, a car, a supportive family, good food to eat. There’s no shame in being privileged, in having needs and wants satisfied. The shame is in playing the game, in seeking places of higher honor at the expense of others. It seems that our gatherings are too often like this gathering of the Pharisees, a gathering of the privileged seeking places of honor.

The gospels tell us about Jesus’ followers, but not many of them are faithful. Richard Russo says of Peter, James, and John in his novel, *Empire Falls*, “They never wanted him crucified, of course, but what a relief it must have been when the stone was rolled across the entrance of the tomb, sealing everything shut so they could go back to being fishermen, which they knew how to do, rather than being fishers of [people], which they didn’t.”

Knowing the challenges faced by the apostles as they spread the good news, we can easily imagine the comfort there would have been to return to fishing, not a lucrative profession by any means, but a good living. We can imagine it because we too find the demands of the gospel challenging. We find sympathy for the excuse-makers of the second parable. It would in fact be to our advantage to see to the recently purchased property rather than attend a feast. A good investment portfolio will support us in an early retirement. Ten oxen was worth a good sum of money in Jesus’ day. And family, well is there anything more important? I cannot come to this gathering in God’s world because I have important business to tend to in my own world. This is the temptation that belongs to the privileged.

The shocking surprise for the Pharisees comes in Jesus’ declaration of who will be at the Great Banquet: “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” Several of the commentators I read claimed that these parables affirmed the equality of all people and the inclusive nature of the invitation. I’m not sure what Bible they’re reading. It is true that in the end all are invited and that God’s desire is for the Banquet hall to be full, but the people there are the poor. The others have excused themselves.

The reality is that those who are doing well in life have less need of God for this life. “They have their reward” as Jesus says elsewhere. When he says, “Take up your cross and follow me... those who would save their lives must lose it,” he is talking to you and me, to those of us who have more than enough. Privilege can get in the way of responding to the invitation to the great banquet.

It would seem that Jesus is setting the poor against the rich, but we should be careful about that conclusion. In fact the first parable suggests that the privileged can turn their gathering into a gathering more in line with God's desire by inviting the poor to the banquet. And those originally invited need not have made excuses. They might heed the call to the feast.

And there's a character in this second parable that we seldom talk about: the servant. I found an aside in one book that suggested that the servant was in fact Jesus himself, that he came to invite the "poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" to the party. Sometimes if you place yourself into one of the characters in a parable, it brings an interesting insight. Maybe it's more interesting to think about the privileged, the excuse-makers, and the poor, but all of these groups are observers. They're not actually doing anything. The servant is doing all the work in the parable, and yes, definitely, it makes sense to see this as Jesus. But I have to ask, "Why not us?" As disciples of Jesus, do we not already belong to the household of God? Are we not being called to do God's bidding?

We are not gathered in this time of pandemic, but this does not mean that we can't be about the ministry of gathering. If we are being sent to the vulnerable in the world, we will need to learn more about them. This is the right time to learn about our black brothers and sisters, to ally ourselves in their struggle for justice. This is the right time to explore the inequities in our criminal justice system and to advocate with legislators for change. This is the right time to put a face and a name to immigrants who are working hard for a better life for them and their children. This is the right time to listen to the poor who are disproportionately affected by the virus.

On one level, these parables are not about privilege and poverty. They're about discipleship, about being sent not with a view to changing people or helping people, but with an invitation to come and feast at God's table.

A day will come when we once again gather face to face, but what will it look like? Who will be present? Maybe if we take seriously the work of gathering, of extending the invitation, of allying ourselves with "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" the banquet hall will be full, more diverse, and more reflective of God's expansive grace and love?

"Go out," says the owner of this house, "into the streets and lanes of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Go out ..." so that God's tables may be full. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 2. (commentary by John P. Burgess, Mark Ralls, Raymond Pickett, and G. Penny Nixon) Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY 2014.

The Parables Then and Now. Archibald M. Hunter. Westminster Press: Philadelphia PA, 1971.