



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Invite the Poor

Luke 14:1-24

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Doug was my first roommate. He and I were randomly assigned to the same set of rooms by a University computer. In our dorm that meant we each had our own room, but I had to go through his room to get to mine. Doug was a nice guy, but we figured out pretty quickly that we didn't get along. I was quiet. He had a stereo with a custom-built amplifier and a 24" sub-woofer. I listened to Classical and Jazz. Doug listened to rap. He had a fake ID and often came home drunk and with a girl or two. And he had the nerve to tell me that if I came home and found one of his ties hanging from the doorknob, I should go sleep on a couch in the TV lounge.

Doug was often the subject of my prayers, and yet it never occurred for me to pray that Doug would be delivered by Jesus. My prayers asked Jesus to deliver me from Doug. After a couple of months my prayers were answered and I moved to a different room. Doug and I had a pretty hostile relationship and as much as I was angry with him for making my life miserable, I didn't need to return the favour by going out of my way to bang around and make loud noises when he was sleeping off hangovers, sabotaging his stereo, or making comments about his loose morals and his girlfriends. Doug was just being Doug. Sinners without Jesus will always be sinners without Jesus. But instead of sharing Jesus with Doug, I mostly responded by being a jerk. And then one Sunday Doug turned up at church. One of the girls he'd taken home on Saturday night somehow talked him into taking her to church on Sunday morning. And I was suddenly in an awkward spot. I was never nice

to Doug. Was I suddenly going to be nice to him because he showed up at church? I'd had lots of opportunity to reach out to him with the love of Jesus, but I never had. I hadn't even prayed for him. And when he showed up at church, I realised that I didn't really even want him there. He was a sinner and he needed God's punishment. That was my way of thinking. But, friends, to think that way is to forget about the grace of God. It's to turn the kingdom into a club for self-righteous holy people. And that's not what the kingdom is. This is just the view of the kingdom that Jesus condemns in our lesson today. Look at Luke 14:1-6.

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" And they could not reply to these things.

This is the second time in Luke's Gospel that we've seen a situation like this. This Pharisee is gracious enough or open enough to Jesus to invite him to a meal. Jesus may have been honoured to speak in the synagogue service that morning and now this local leader of the Pharisee party invites him home for dinner. It's the perfect setup for Jesus.

Remember that for the Jews of that day and especially for the Pharisees, there were three main things that set them apart from everyone else in the world: circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and their dietary regulations. Two of those things come in to play here. The Pharisees were zealous to keep the Sabbath holy and that meant avoiding any kind of work. They were

also zealous about purity—not just *what* they ate, but also *who* they invited to the table. You could have clean food, but if someone unclean sat down at the table it would all be rendered unclean. And remember too that a banquet in that time and place was all about social status. Guest lists were carefully planned. The idea was to reinforce your social standing, so you invited people who were your social betters in the hope that they would then be obligated to invite you to their banquets and you invited your social inferiors—although not *too* inferior—to show them patronage and to put them in your debt.

And during the meal Jesus sees this man with dropsy or oedema and turns it all upside-down. It may have been a setup by the Pharisees who wanted to see how Jesus would respond, but it's more likely that this man was a beggar who came looking for scraps or leftovers from the rich man's table. Instead of throwing him some scraps, Jesus invites him in and heals him. And, of course, they're shocked and appalled, but there's nothing they can say, because Jesus has shown them that he takes the Sabbath just as seriously as they do. The *difference* is that for them, observing the Sabbath was a way of identifying themselves as the "in group". They were the holiness club and being holy kept them pure from the unholy rabble of the world. In stark contrast, for Jesus the Sabbath was all about manifesting the presence of God and preaching good news to the poor—it was about imparting God's holiness to the unholy.

Jesus had asked them for their legal opinion about healing on the Sabbath and they had chosen not to answer, so they're stuck now. They can't say anything, but Jesus can tell that they're upset. They can't get past their idea of the kingdom being for holy people. The idea of reaching out to the unclean and the unholy doesn't make any sense to them—in fact it looks like Jesus is trying to destroy the kingdom by inviting in people who

don't belong! In response Jesus tells them two parables. Look at 14:7-11.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

On the surface this might just look like good social advice: Do this and you'll spare yourself embarrassment. It's a reapplication of and expansion on Proverbs 25:6-7:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence

or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"

than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

And yet Jesus isn't intending to give an etiquette lesson. This is a parable that describes the kingdom—and the kingdom it describes clashed with the kingdom envisioned by the Pharisees. The way in which they behaved at this Sabbath banquet said something about how they understood the kingdom of God. And this is often the case for us: How we deal with and relate to our fellow human beings reflects how we view God and his kingdom. How I responded to my roommate, Doug, said a lot about my understanding of where I stood with God.

During the years that the Jews were in exile in Babylon, when they had no temple and couldn't offer sacrifices to God, the idea developed that to be faithful in following *torah*—the law—could substitute for sacrifices. This is where the legalism of the Pharisees had its roots. This is why they were so zealous to study the law and to work out how it applied in every conceivable situation: to be faithful in observing the law was to be faithful to God. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The problem is that many of them who were wealthy and who were literate enough to be able to study the law and all of the scholarly legal writings about it often started to think of themselves as being superior to the poor and to the illiterate and to all the people who didn't understand the law as well as they did. Yes, there was a place in the kingdom for the poor and unspiritual rabble who were circumcised, but knew little else, but when the Messiah came and welcomed everyone into his banquet, the Pharisees were going to be the ones welcomed in with hugs and seated at the head table while everyone else just scurried in and ate the scraps the same way the poor scurried into their Sabbath dinner and ran away with a few scraps.

Their vision of the kingdom left out the important element of *grace* and whenever we leave out grace we're going to get the kingdom wrong. For them the kingdom was about honour and prestige, it was about purity and about birth. It was about patronage and obligation and always expecting something in return—even with God. They kept his law, therefore he was obligated to show them favour. But Jesus shows us something totally different. He reminds them of the words of one of their own from an earlier generation. Jesus ben Sira had written:

My son, perform your tasks in meekness;

then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.

The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself;

so you will find favor in the sight of the Lord.

For great is the might of the Lord;

he is glorified by the humble.

(Sirach 3:17-20)

Humility is the attitude of the man or woman who stands in God's grace—who remembers that none of us belongs in the kingdom, but that God is merciful to us. And the humble person, instead of assuming the seat of honour is for him, takes the lowest seat. Jesus has talked before about bearing fruit. This is what that fruit looks like. It's the fruit that the Lord will not only recognise, but will honour and exalt. This is the fruit that shows the kind of faith that Jesus has come to establish in God's people.

Jesus goes on in verses 12-14 to describe more practically what this fruit looks like:

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Jesus strikes at the Pharisees' source of security. The resurrection of the dead was one of the key doctrines of the Pharisees. They knew that when the Messiah came, he would judge the wicked and resurrect the righteous. And, of course, *they* were the righteous who would be resurrected. And here Jesus tells them: "The resurrection you're sure of—you're going to miss it if you don't change—if you don't repent. You're convinced

the Lord will reward you for your righteousness, but until you start showing mercy and grace to the poor, to the unclean, and to the outsider, you will never understand true righteousness. If you want to take part in the coming resurrection of the dead, you need to start bearing fruit that reflects grace. You need to get your head around the *fact* that for all your righteousness and law-keeping, you too are sinners. You won't be saved because of your family or your intellect, your law-keeping or your spirituality. Only those who can humbly acknowledge their sinfulness and who are ready to trust in God's grace—and are humble and gracious enough to share it with sinners even worse than themselves—only they will be resurrected when the Lord comes.

But Jesus fellow dinner guests still don't get it. One clueless soul chimes in, cheerfully declaring: "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" He doesn't understand that Jesus is telling him that if he doesn't repent of his self-righteousness, if he doesn't humble himself before God, he *won't* eat bread in the kingdom of God. And so Jesus tells a second parable that's even more vivid and that strikes even harder at the Jews' source of security. Look at verses 15-20:

But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'

Remember, again, how important an event like this was in the First

Century. This wasn't just a matter of putting a roast in the oven and inviting friends to eat and play cards after dinner. If they call at the last minute to say they can't make it, you might be disappointed, but you can do it again next week. A banquet like the one Jesus describes was a major social event. The guest list was carefully made to everyone's mutual social advantage. To top it off, a big banquet was an expensive affair—you couldn't just postpone it because your guests backed out at the last minute. And for that matter, as a guest to a banquet like this, backing out was a huge social snub. For all their excuses, what these guests are really doing is orchestrating a rejection of their host—they're trying to knock him from his perch at the top of the social hierarchy.

What's interesting is that the man hosting the banquet simply decides to throw all social propriety and the whole hierarchical system of their world out the window. If the people of his own social class will have nothing to do with him, he'll have nothing to do with them. Look at how he responds:

So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'" (Luke 14:21-24)

When the rich won't come, he rounds up the poor. Notice that his servant literally has to bring them or even compel them to come to the banquet. The poor and crippled and blind and lame *knew* that they didn't belong.

When they heard the invitation from the servant, they would have thought it was a joke. Banquets were all about quid pro quo and tit for tat. They had nothing to offer this rich man who invited them. And so the rich man sends his servants out to round up these outsiders and to bring them to the banquet to enjoy his gracious hospitality. In fact, the rich man rejects the whole system of patronage and debts and reciprocal favours—none of those who rejected his invitation will ever sit at his table. Instead, he's going to share his hospitality with the people who haven't earned it and can never repay it.

Luke doesn't tell us how the Pharisees responded or if they even understood, but it's hard to think that it didn't sink in on some level. Everyone in the Jewish world, and especially the Pharisees, were waiting for the Lord's return. The prophets had talked about that great day in terms of a great banquet and this banquet idea then became a common image of the coming Day of the Lord. And now Jesus explains that he's come to open the door to that great banquet. This is what Israel has been waiting for all these years. And yet Jesus rebukes them. This isn't the first time the Lord has extended his invitation. For centuries he had called to his people through the prophets, but they had refused to hear the prophets and had even killed some of them. And now Jesus has come and he's travelled through Galilee and Judea, inviting everyone to the banquet, but like the people in the parable, they all have excuses.

It's worth noting the excuses given in the parable. One man says that he's bought five yoke of oxen sight-unseen and has to check them over. Another has bought a field sight-unseen and needs to go have a look at it. The third just got married and has obligations to his new bride. The first two excuses peg these men as very

wealthy. Five yoke of oxen would only be needed to plough a very large tract of land. A wealthy absentee landlord was the sort of person who would buy a field without first seeing it. But all three of these excuses go back to the law given in Deuteronomy. A man who had built a new house, but hadn't dedicated it yet, a man who had bought a field, but hadn't enjoyed its produce, and a newly married man were all excused from going off to war. And now these guests twist those laws as excuses to reject their host's banquet. But this is what Israel had done with the law: twisting it into something it was never meant to be. And it's that twisting of the law that was particularly exemplified in the Pharisees. Jesus didn't meet their expectations of the Messiah. His banquet included too many sinners, unclean people, and outsiders. And so they rejected the invitation. And so Jesus issues a warning here: If you continue to reject my invitation I will turn from you and take my invitation to the unclean and to the sick and to the poor—and even to the gentiles—and having rejected me, you will never taste of my goodness or of the salvation I've brought to the world.

But the parable has another level of meaning. Imagine Luke writing a generation later. Even if greater Israel had rejected Jesus' invitation, thousands of Jews had accepted it. The first Christians were all Jews, and then an amazing thing happened: the Good News went out to the hated Samaritans—and they accepted the invitation. And then it went out to the Gentiles—and thousands of them accepted it too. And suddenly those first Jewish Christians were in a situation very much like the Pharisees had been. They were Jews. They were the chosen. They were the clean people. They were the righteous and holy people. Even an apostle like Peter struggled to go and pray with a gentile convert. It's a reminder that even we who have received the grace of God, are still prone to forgetting

that we come to his Table not because of our own merit, but only because of Jesus and only because of grace. We need to remember that any time we're tempted to think, like I did with Doug, that there are people who don't belong here. Brothers and sisters, none of us belongs here. We're only here because God is gracious and sent his Son to die and rise from the dead for our sake.

But this now takes us back to Jesus' call in verses 12-14: "When you give a dinner...do not invite your friends...lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Dear friends, as you come to the Lord's Table this morning, think on the fact that he has invited us here from the highways and hedges. We didn't belong here, but Jesus has washed us clean and grafted us into his family as adopted sons and daughters. *Because of him* we do belong. But having been invited, he now calls us to be hosts ourselves. Lest we forget. Lest we think that we've earned our place here at the Table. Lest we ever think, as I did, that others don't belong, Jesus now calls us to go out to the highways and the hedges—to go to the place we may have forgotten he once found us. He calls us to look for the poor, the unclean, and sinners, not to condemn them, but to invite them to the Lord's banquet—to invite them to receive the grace of God just as we have. To invite them to come and be forgiven, healed, set free, and washed clean by Jesus.

Let us pray: Father, in today's collect we recalled that justice requires us sinners to be punished, but we also asked you to hear our prayer for mercy. You delight to show mercy to sinners and you graciously sent your Son to suffer the punishment we deserve. We have received your grace

and have been given new life. Remind us to set aside all thoughts of self-righteousness. Give us opportunities now to share your mercy and grace with others, give us eyes to see those opportunities, and a love for sinners that we might never let those opportunities pass us by. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.