



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Great Banquet

Luke 14:16-24

Fr. William Klock

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St. John tells us in our Epistle, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). I sometimes wonder why John would address these people as “Little Children”. Is it just expressing his father-like love for these fellow Christians to whom he wrote? Or—and the more I see how we Christians sometimes act—is it because we really do act like little children—in the negative sense of being spoiled and rotten, selfish and unloving. How often do we hear that Jesus humbled himself for our sake; that he took on our human flesh for our sake; that he was despised and rejected for our sake; that he was crucified for our sake—and in that we hear his amazing love for us, and we embrace it and we find forgiveness and we think about how much we love God for what he’s done—we even sing songs on Sunday morning about how much we love God because he first loved us. And then we gossip about a brother or a sister, we act like jerks out in the world, we see others in need and turn a blind eye, and we refuse to share the Good News about Jesus with the people around us who so desperately need to know of the love God for sinners. We act like “little children”. Talking about love is easy and cheap; actual loving in deed and in truth can be difficult and costly.

We profess love for Jesus, but when it comes to others we can be selfish and proud. I’ve told you before about Doug, my first roommate. He was a nice guy, but he also liked loud rap music and his 24” subwoofer while I liked quiet classical and jazz. I was a good church kid who stayed out of trouble. On the weekends Doug often came home drunk and with one or more girls in tow. He had the nerve to tell me that when that happened I needed to give him some

privacy and go sleep in the TV lounge. Doug made me miserable. I probably made Doug miserable too, for that matter.

And so I prayed for Doug. I prayed for Doug a lot. I prayed that the Lord would deliver me from Doug. It never occurred to me to pray for the Lord to deliver Doug from his sin. I don’t think it every occurred to me to pray for opportunities to tell Doug about Jesus. I just prayed for Doug to somehow get out of my life. And things between us deteriorated. It wasn’t just him. I was sure to make plenty of loud noises when he was hung over. Once I sabotaged his stereo. I felt compelled to make some pretty self-righteous comments about his morality—or lack thereof. But the thing is that Doug was just being Doug. As some might put it today, “Sinners gonna sin.” It’s what they do. Sinners without Jesus will always be sinners without Jesus. There are certainly times to speak out against sin in the world, but what sinners need most is Jesus and instead of telling Doug about Jesus I responded by being a jerk.

And then one Sunday to my great surprise, Doug showed up at church. He’d gone home with a girl on Saturday night and apparently, come morning, she felt the need to go to church and talked him into taking her. And that put me in an awkward spot. I was never nice to Doug. Was I going to be nice to him now? I’d had a couple of months to witness Jesus to him and to tell him the Good News, but I’d never done it. I hadn’t even prayed for him. And there he was at church and I realised that I didn’t even want him there. He was a sinner and he needed God’s punishment. That was my way of thinking at the time.

I know I’m not the only Christians to have ever had those sorts of feelings and responded to a non-Christian by being nasty. It’s sadly all too easy for us to experience the grace of God ourselves, but then forget that Jesus found us when we were sinners. It’s easy for us to think of the Church as a club for holy people. And it’s not a new problem. When Jesus came he found that most of the Jews had this same kind of outlook on the kingdom. It was a place for

insiders and they did everything they could to keep the outsiders on the outside. But that’s not what the kingdom is about and just the error that Jesus addresses in our Gospel this morning.

At the beginning of Chapter 14, Luke tells us that one Sabbath Jesus was invited to have dinner at the house of a prominent Pharisee—one of their party leaders—and that there was a man there who had dropsy or oedema. The whole thing looks like a setup. Looking at the man and then turning to these authorities on the law, Jesus asks them if it’s legal to heal on the Sabbath. Luke says that they were silent. Jesus then healed the man and sent him on his way and we can gather that the lawyers and Pharisees all looked very offended and scandalised—even though they had to have known that this is what Jesus would do. Jesus then asked them, “Which of you who, if your son or your ox fell into a well on the Sabbath wouldn’t immediately pull him out?” And despite the answer being obvious—of course they’d pull him out!—they don’t know what to say. They know whatever they might say will condemn them.

What’s going on here? Remember that for the Jews of Jesus’ day and especially for the Pharisees, there were three main things that set them apart from everyone else in the world: circumcision, the Sabbath, and their diet. Two of those things come into play here. The Pharisees were zealous to keep the Sabbath holy and that meant absolutely no kind of work. They were also zealous about purity—not just what they ate, but also who they ate with. It was pointless to have clean food if someone who was unclean sat down at your table and rendered everything unclean. Now, circumcision, Sabbath, and diet were given by God as boundary markers for his people—visible signs to set them apart from the world. But they were never meant to be means to keep the world outside. Israel was given a light, but instead of holding it high for the nations to see, she hid it under a basket—and then she condemned the world for being lost in the dark.

It makes me think of me and Doug. Doug was into promiscuous sex and promiscuous booze. Christians aren't. What two things better distinguish the boundary between Jesus' people and the world today? But I stopped being an example of what holiness looks like when I used those things as justification for condemning Doug rather than a reason to show him the love that Jesus has for sinners. And then I was upset when Doug turned up at church and befouled our holiness with his unholiness. I was just like these Jewish legal experts in the Gospel.

I strongly suspect this was a setup meant to trap Jesus. The man was most likely a beggar who showed up at the door for scraps. Beggars did that all the time when rich people were having banquets. But to see what Jesus will do, his host allows this man to actually slip into the banquet. And instead of throwing him some scraps and sending him on his way, Jesus welcomes the man into the banquet and heals him. And they're shocked and appalled. Jesus has ruined the banquet—everything's unclean now. But he's also—Gasp!—done work on the Sabbath. For them the kingdom is a club for holy people. The unholy and the unclean have no place in it. From their warped perspective, they see Jesus as a threat to the kingdom. He might as well be signing up a girl for the Boy Scouts—he's going to ruin the whole thing!

The Pharisees didn't know what to say, but Jesus launches in to two parables. The first addresses all the social posturing that went on at these banquets. Everyone was invited for a reason and ultimately in order for the host to show off the status he had in the world and, hopefully, to elevate himself even higher. The second parable is today's Gospel reading and it begins at verses 12-14:

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 many of them 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 grace when 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 where 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, 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.