

8. The Parable of the Marriage Feast

(Matt. 22: 1-14; Luke 14: 15-24))

As we journey through the parables together, we are learning many spiritual truths by trying to have *ears to hear* the real meaning of Jesus' very simple stories. Last time, we talked about an interesting saying of Jesus: *the first shall be last and the last shall be first*. Now we'll look at another parable that explores this strange idea.

In his gospel, St. Luke tells us that Jesus was talking to a group of people at a dinner party, and said to his host,

“When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

(Luke 14: 12-14)

Jesus always encourages us to take care of the people who need help; He asks us to take care of those people who cannot work or take care of themselves. Those people may not be able to pay you back, or to give you anything in return, but that's ok, because you will be “repaid at the resurrection of the just”! If you give generously to others, God will give generously to you.

One of the people at the table heard this, and it made him picture someone having a dinner party and inviting the sick and the lame and the poor -- and then instead of being repaid with parties at their houses, he would be repaid with a party in heaven! How wonderful. He cried out, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14: 15) What a beautiful thought.

Then Jesus told him a parable in response:

“A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’

So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.’

And the servant said, ‘Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room. Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.’”

(Luke 14: 16-24)

This man has set up a beautiful feast and invited all of his friends -- but they won't come. How do you suppose that feels? If you have taken a lot of time to think about what exactly would bring joy to your friends, and then you've gone to a lot of effort to put it all together, wouldn't it make you feel sad that they wouldn't just come and enjoy it? He must have felt disappointed.

They had excuses for not coming to the banquet, but it's interesting to notice that they aren't saying they have problems; they cannot come because they have blessings. They say, ‘I have bought a piece of ground’ or ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen’ or ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ They all have so many wonderful blessings in their lives that they are too busy to attend the feast.

The man tells his servant to invite “the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.” Remember that Jesus just told his host to invite these same people, the less fortunate ones in our society, to banquets? They cannot return the favor and invite you to come feast, but God will return the favor in heaven. Now this man follows Jesus' advice. The people who are successful and rich will not come to the feast, but instead it will be filled with those who are poor and unfortunate.

Even then, there's still plenty of room at the feast! So the man tells his servant to ‘Go out into the highways and hedges’ to find strangers, to find just anyone out there, to come to his feast. His friends won't come, so he invites absolutely anyone, and those who come will grow to be his friends. And maybe those are better friends to him, because they are willing to take the time to come to his party!

For those who have *ears to hear*, this is not just a story about a party. It's a story about God, about the Kingdom of Heaven. God is this master, and He is preparing a feast for you in heaven! He has taken time to create a place for you, your own room in His mansion, your own seat at a table that is just completely overflowing with good things! He has prepared this banquet for each of us, and He invites us to come join Him.

Very often in the Church, we think about this heavenly banquet. Jesus talks about it often, and we recognize that in heaven, God has laid out a rich feast for us. Even today though, right here on earth, we get a taste of that feast. When we receive Holy Communion, we are all coming together to receive part of that feast right here. God invites all of us to come to this feast, both here on earth in Holy Communion, and later, with eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus points out that many of us say, “*No, thank you*”, to that invitation because we are too busy with our blessings! We are buying land or oxen or getting married. That is to say, we are busy with other things that entertain us and make us happy. The really crazy thing is that God gave us all those things! We cannot be successful in life on our own; we are able to work and to play only because God gives us life and strength! He is the one who gives us the wonderful relationships in our lives, and the abundant blessings that make us happy. How disappointing it must be that so many of us are so busy enjoying the gifts He is giving us that we will not take the time to come for the greatest gift of all, this heavenly banquet!

When “the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind” are invited, they show up. They appreciate God’s feast. When life is not so easy, when we are not distracted by all of those beautiful blessings, we hear the call to the banquet and are happy to attend! There is something about having too many blessings that makes us forget to come to God’s banquet, but when those are gone and life is a struggle, we are better at remembering to come to God. This is part of the reason that we fast. When we deprive ourselves a bit of the many blessings that God gives us, our soul is better able to turn toward God!

Of course, you don’t have to be suffering to come to the banquet! God offers comfort and love to those who suffer, but He also invites everyone else, as His servant goes out to the “highways and the hedges” to find anyone he can find, and to invite them to the banquet!

You may have noticed that this time, He did not begin with “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*” but in fact, Jesus will tell this same story twice, and He does say it the second time.. This dinner party conversation is in St. Luke’s gospel, but St. Matthew records that Jesus also told this story to some Pharisees. He is speaking to leaders of Israel. We remember that Israel is the chosen people of God! Remember Abraham and Noah, Jacob and Moses and David and Solomon --in the Old Testament, we have learned that God chose these people to be a lamp to the world! He took special care of the Israelites, and He kept promising to send them His Son. Now Jesus is there, the promised King of Kings who has come to save everyone!

In this second version of the story, the man is a King, and the dinner party is actually a wedding banquet for his son! God is the great King, and Jesus is the Son of God, and He is here to be joined with us, like two people are joined in marriage. We often say that Jesus is the

bridegroom and the Church is the bride. We mean that Jesus wants to be united with us, to become family together. God throws this banquet to invite us into the Church, into the Kingdom.

Who do you suppose this servant is? If God is hosting the banquet, who is He sending to tell people that they are invited to come be with God and the Son of God? Surely St. Luke and St. Matthew are His servants, telling us this parable in the Holy Gospels they've written! All of the apostles and saints who have gone through the world to teach people about Jesus are those servants. And your priest and your Sunday School teachers and your parents even, they are servants of God who tell you that God loves you and wants you at his feast!

God sent servants to His chosen people, the Israelites. He sent the holy prophets -- Moses and King David, Samuel and Elijah and Isaiah -- and they gave God's message to the Israelites. And then St. John the Forerunner came and told them that the Lamb of God was on His way! And finally our Lord, Jesus Christ, is right there on earth in the middle of their chosen nation, and He is inviting them to the banquet. The Israelites are the first people invited, but they say, "No, thank you." Many of them are too busy with their own success; they don't want to leave that success to come follow Christ! They want to keep their fortunes and their power. So they say no.

So this parable has an even deeper meaning: God chose His people, and promised them a Messiah, a Savior, so that they could be united with Him, and He blessed them and loved them. But so many of His beloved people were happy to enjoy the blessings He gave, but they did not come to the banquet. They did not follow His Son and stay in the Kingdom. They said no.

The banquet is not empty -- lots of other people will come! The "the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind" and the people from the "highways and the hedges" -- other people out in the world who are not from the chosen people of Israel -- are invited to the banquet and they come! The word for the people on earth who were not Israelites is "gentiles" and when God sends His servants, His holy apostles, to tell them about the great feast of the Son of God, they will come! The Church is filled with people who were never part of that first chosen nation. The Greeks and the Antiochians, for example, heard the words of the apostles and were baptized and followed Christ! They weren't in that first group, but they are welcome at the banquet!

God sends out invitations to every human on earth, to come to His great feast and to enjoy His banquet. He continues to send out those invitations through His servants. It is up to us to decide if we will accept His invitation and enter into His Banquet Hall to enjoy the feast that He spreads for us, or not. We should remember this parable and the people who missed out on the feast because of all of those other things that were more important to them. Let's take a look at our own life: is there something that seems more important than God and His

Kingdom? Do we make excuses to not pray or not go to Church or not be kind to others? And then let's decide what we really want: do we really want to miss out on the great feast God offers? Or will we accept His invitation?

When we accept it and enjoy His feast, let's make sure to invite our friends so that we can all feast and celebrate God's kind generosity together!

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! Let's hear and understand!

QUESTIONS:

In the parable, when the great supper was ready and the man sent out his servants to the people who had been invited beforehand, what did those people do? Did they come right away to eat?

- *No, they did not come right away. They knew that they were invited, but when it was time for the supper, they did not come. Instead, they began to make excuses. One needed to check on his new piece of land. Another decided to test his new oxen. Another had just gotten married and just wanted to be with his wife. All of these excuses kept them away from the supper.*

God invited a special group of people, the Israelites, to eat at His banquet. Did they come and eat? Or, like the man in the parable, did He have to find others to come enjoy the feast in their place?

- *They did not come to the banquet: the people of Israel did not follow His Son and stay in the Kingdom. They said no. But lots of other people are coming -- people who were not Israelites are called "gentiles" and when God sends His servants, His holy apostles, to tell the gentiles about the great feast of the Son of God, they will come! The Church is filled with people who were never part of that first chosen nation.*

The man was angry that his invited guests chose not to come to his supper. What did he tell his servants to do?

- *He sent his servants to invite the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind. When those people came and there was still room at the table, he sent the servants out into the highways and hedges to bring everyone they could find, to fill his house up. He wanted all of*

those people to eat the good supper he had planned, but none of the invited guests got to eat any of it, because they had made excuses instead of coming.

FOR DISCUSSION:

The people who were invited to the banquet made a lot of excuses for why they would not come, didn't they? And it's not like they didn't know the banquet was going to happen: they had been invited, so they knew it was coming up! They could have planned ahead to do the thing that became their excuse at another time so they would not miss the banquet, but they chose not to, made excuses, and then missed the yummy supper. It seems pretty silly of them, doesn't it?

What does this parable have to do with you? Think about this: do you ever make excuses that keep you away from God's Heavenly banquet? Maybe you are too busy to pray. It could be that you would rather play with your friends than spend time talking to God or studying the Bible. Or perhaps you have a really important sports thing or school activity that you will do instead of being part of the Divine Liturgy.

Now that you've studied this parable, do you see these excuses in a different way? Do your excuses seem as silly to you as the excuses the people in the parable had made?

Talk together about what plan you can make so that you do not have to miss the Heavenly banquet!