

## FOR THE LOST OUT ON THE STREET, GRACE WINS

Luke 14: 15-24

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Jesus has been talking about what happens to us human beings when we gather together socially. We worry about fitting in. We care about what other people think of us. We may bring a hostess gift to a party but we also bring our egos. Jesus had attended a wedding recently and noticed how people were behaving. They were trying to ingratiate themselves to the host, trying to look important and popular.

Some social situations are fun, of course, but some are fraught with anxiety, and some are more like business transactions. I hear people say, “Well, my friends have invited me to their daughter’s wedding. I know they’re spending at least \$100 on dinner so I have to give a gift that cost at least that much.” Or you’re invited over to the boss’ house for dinner, and you can’t enjoy the meal because you keep thinking of the pressure you feel to reciprocate.

Jesus hints that those events are not really about hospitality. They’re about power and an exchange of goods and services. If you want to practice hospitality, Jesus says, here’s you do it: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...”

Hospitality, to Jesus, is not having each other over on Friday evenings but welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return. But don’t do it with a thought that you’re better than your guests. This isn’t charity. You’re not operating a soup

kitchen; you're sitting down with your guests. This clear sign of acceptance, of recognizing other as one's equals, is what it means to break bread together. In the Christian community no one is a "project." This is how Jesus intends us to live.

He's not joking around, he's serious. And to illustrate his point, he tells a story.

A man is giving a banquet and he invites a lot of people. At first they say they're coming, but then things come up. You know how it is. The soccer tournament that somehow didn't make it onto the family calendar. Your mom's having surgery in Columbus and you need to be there to check on her. That's the weekend your new furniture's being delivered and you have to finish painting the living room first. You promised your brother-in-law you'd help him move. Things come up. And they did for the original host in Jesus' parable. These aren't lame excuses. It's life.

Jesus' listeners are not impressed by this story so far. Nothing interesting has happened. A man invites his friends to a party but at the last minute, they can't come. OK.

But what does the man do next? Does he cancel his party? Re-schedule? Oh, no. The party goes on. He sends his servant to the streets to find people to fill the banquet hall. "We have food, we have drink, we have music. We are having a party. I want every seat filled." And so they come. The homeless. The people hanging out outside the Salvation Army. The people who smell. The people no one ever invites anywhere. Those living with disabilities. Those other people shun or fear. The immigrants. The refugees. Those living with mental illness. The guy that just got out of jail. The pregnant teenager. The runaway. The addict. They come until the house is filled.

And now people pay attention to the story. Wait a minute – why is Jesus telling us this story? Is God the host of this banquet? Does God really welcome everybody in to the kingdom?

That is radical, extravagant hospitality. It has nothing to do with using the best china or hiring the most expensive DJ. It has everything to do with an expansive spirit, a graciousness that opens every door and every heart wide.

This parable causes us to look in two directions. First we stand amazed at the assortment of people enjoying the banquet, so much joy on faces of people who don't ever get invited to parties. Looking around the room, we see what God's inclusive love looks like. Truly, as we sang earlier, "All are welcome."

But the parable also causes us to look in the other direction. Look at the guy who's painting his living room. Look at the family spending the weekend at the soccer tournament. What are they missing? They're missing the party of the century; no, they're missing the party of a lifetime.

Now I want to be careful here and not draw a parallel between missing church every now and then and missing out on the reign of God. They are not the same thing. This is not a sermon meant to cause you to feel guilty because you sometimes choose other priorities on Sunday morning. Please don't hear it that way, because the message is meant to be so much more significant than that.

The point is this. We are all invited to be a part of life as God imagines it. A life of joy, a life of meaning and purpose and service. A life where your talents are tapped, your gifts are used, your time is valued. A life where you get up in the morning knowing that you will make a difference for good. That is life in God's realm.

And sometimes we live there. Some people live there more often than others. But sometimes we make other choices. Other priorities pull at us. Other commitments seem more important. It's so easy to become distracted from what is meant to be our central focus. And pretty soon, all you're thinking about is, "What can I do that's fun? What can I do that's pleasurable? What will keep me from thinking about the pain in my life? What can I buy? Where can I go? What movie or tv show can I watch, what game can I play to help me escape reality?" Our lives can become unbalanced so quickly.

I love to imagine that there's a p.s. to this parable. In fact, I believe there is. The p.s. is this. No matter how far you have wandered away from God, there is no lock on this banquet door. It's always left unlocked so that stragglers can come in. People who have second thoughts about what's most important. People who heard the music and were drawn to it.

A friend of mine was very active in his church. He had several leadership positions, he attended worship every chance he could. He made some friendships there that were very important to him. I admired his commitment, and was so happy that church seemed to make such a positive difference in his life. But then he ran into some challenges at work, and he started attending church less often. He became less involved. He faced some personal problems and didn't confide in anyone at church about them. What bothered me most is that he didn't seem the same person. He didn't seem happy, he didn't act as kind. I'm not suggesting that church is a magic pill that makes everything in your life better, but what I've seen with my own eyes, over and over again, is that being involved in mission and service, doing something to help others, ALWAYS improves a person's life. It provides balance, it provides perspective, it takes us away from unhealthy self-absorption.

What I hope for my friend is that he remembers that invitation he received, to a party that is still going on. I hope he's not too proud, not too embarrassed to put his hand on the doorknob, and walk in. Because once he's in, he'll remember what it was like to be surrounded by God's welcoming, inclusive grace.

When we think of those who are lost out on the street, we think of the down-and-out guy who's picking up cigarette butts outside the homeless shelter. But sometimes we are the ones who are lost. We lose our way and forget who we are, forget that we have a home, a spiritual home, a place where we belong, and someone who is waiting for us there. God's grace is offered to each of us. To all of us.

Don't you love the fact that Jesus describes God's realm as a party, a sumptuous banquet? We think of religion as serious business. Religious people are often grim. They're not the ones throwing parties. No, they're the ones who stand in judgment of people throwing parties. But that's not the way Jesus thought or lived. Jesus describes as a God who wants us to thrive, to enjoy life in the deepest most real way possible. So forget the excuses. Come to the party of grace.