

## THE JESUS VIRTUES: EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME

Luke 14: 15-24

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One of the most enjoyable aspects of my job can be working with couples who are preparing to get married. We talk about their personalities, their family histories, their goals, and then we also talk about the details of the wedding itself. “How many are you inviting?” is a question I usually ask, and sometimes that question prompts a conversation full of anxiety and stress. Putting together the invitation list for a wedding is often the first real test for a couple and their parents. What do you do when one family is big and the other is small? The groom’s father has 8 siblings; there are only two aunts and uncles on the bride’s side. Does each side invite the same number of people? Which friends do you invite? Who do you exclude?

It stings when you’re one of the excluded. You understand, logically. The rational part of our brain knows that every wedding has a limited number of guests, and that just because you didn’t make the cut doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you. But it can hurt. Anytime you’re not invited to something, whether planned or spontaneous, you wonder, “Do they not like me anymore?” We’ve all felt rejected. We’ve all seen pictures later of an event at which we weren’t included.

And there are also times when we are the ones who RSVP no. For all kinds of reasons.

Jesus told a story once about a man who planned a dinner party and whose invited guests all declined. Every single one of them declined the invitation. Their reasons are valid and understandable. “I’ve just bought some land, and I need to go out and inspect it.” If you’ve ever bought property, you know how all-consuming that

process can be. It takes over your life for a while. There are meetings with inspectors, realtors, papers to sign. This reason for missing a party makes sense.

The second example in the parable is also about business and economics. "I've just bought five yoke of oxen, and I need to go out and test them." I don't know anyone in Lorain or Cuyahoga Counties who owns oxen, but again, this is a big purchase, and comes with requirements attached. This excuse, too, makes sense.

There was also someone who'd just gotten married - in that culture, those newly married were not expected to participate in social events. They were even exempt from military service for a while.

I imagine that the landowner throwing the party felt the sting of rejection and hurt. Who wouldn't? A couple of people rsvp no? That's to be expected. But every single person invited?

He's angry, that's what Luke tells us. And in his anger he says to his assistant, "We're having this party anyway. The food I ordered is not going to waste. I've already booked the DJ. Go into town, into the streets and alleys, and bring in those who are poor or crippled, and those who are blind and lame." Go get the people who look homeless. Go and scour the back roads and side roads. Look who's standing in line at the soup kitchen and the food pantry, and invite them.

Instead of canceling the dinner, the host ordered his servants to go out into the streets and invite people who don't ordinarily get to attend fancy dinner parties. When they all found their way to the table, there was still room, so the host sent the servants out again. "Compel them to come," one version of this story says, "so that my house may be filled."

We can find this parable in Matthew also. In his version the host tells his servants, "Invite everyone, the good and the bad."

Imagine that the crowds who followed Jesus are hearing this story for the first time. They hear it just as a story, and we know Jesus was a compelling story teller. They're drawn in. They picture the people responding "no" to the invitations. They feel the anger of the host. What will the host do? Invite more friends? The "B" list this time? Or cancel the party?

They're utterly surprised when Jesus says, "No - the host doesn't invite more acquaintances and business associates. No - the host doesn't cancel the party. He fills his fancy house with street people, that's what he does."

The people in the crowd make their way home that evening, after listening to Jesus preach and teach. "What was that story about?" they wonder to themselves.

Could it be a story about God? About the wide expanse of God's hospitality and love? And does it have something to say to us about how God is asking us to live?

What does this story say to the Christian church through the years, and to us, here and now, on this communion Sunday? On this day when we welcome new members?

The host at the party believes and acts as though the banquet table is open. It is not reserved for those who live in a certain zip code or have the proper clothes. It is not restricted to those who uphold particular moral standards. It is not restricted to those who espouse a particular ideology or political philosophy. This table, Jesus said, is radically open. All are welcome here. This table, Jesus said, is precisely the place where all the boundaries that divide the human family are transcended, where reconciliation is made possible. All that would divide us - race, religion, political

affiliation, tribe, geography, gender, sexuality, wealth or poverty, job status - is seen in a new light. Our differences are no longer problems, but causes for celebration. The table grows bigger, wider, longer, more abundant.

This parable is not an isolated teaching; Jesus embodied hospitality and the widest possible welcome. He asked a motley diverse crew to be his disciples. He deliberately chose people who wouldn't have been friends with each other, people who thought differently politically, people of various social standing. Jesus spent time with women and children, in an era when many people treated both women and children as nothing but property and sources of labor. He spoke to lepers and ate with prostitutes, he had dinner at the home of a tax collector. Jesus showed, at every turn, that there is no one who is not invited to participate in God's life giving realm.

This radical hospitality is so different from the way we do things. We have applications and background checks, we have rules and regulations. We're very concerned with who we should let in and who we should keep out.

One person writes, "Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see that God is the God of **ALL** humankind. Nothing has proved harder than to see God in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not my faith, whose truth is not my truth."

This is God's idea, God's hope and dream for the human family: We celebrate at this table where all are invited. We celebrate God's radical gracious hospitality - right at the center of things, that open-armed welcome to all the children of God to return home - where they belong, where all of us belong, at the table; God's beautiful, divine impatience that will not be satisfied until all the barriers and boundaries are gone and all are in and the house of God is full.

If you are still feeling the sting of being rejected, the hurt of not being invited, or the pain that comes when the rsvp's are returned to you with what seem like lame excuses, know this. **YOU** are invited to God's banquet, you are invited to a life of abundance and wholeness, you are invited to this table.

The only ones who don't get in are the ones who choose to walk in a different direction. They're the ones missing out. Remember the elder son in the parable of the prodigal son? He just couldn't get his head around the fact that Dad was throwing a welcome home party for his ne-er do well brother, the embarrassment of the family. Instead of walking in and feeling his father's embrace, and realizing that Dad has enough love to go around, the elder son stews and fumes outside while he hears the music and smells the barbecue.

The only ones excluded are the ones who exclude themselves.

Let us pray. We are so grateful, God, for your radical, extravagant, inclusive love and for the way Jesus embodied it. May we do the same. Amen.