

¹⁵When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

¹⁶Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.

¹⁷At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

¹⁸"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

¹⁹"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

²⁰"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

²¹"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

²²"'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'

²³"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

PRAY

As we know, Covid19 has derailed many special celebrations - birthday parties and anniversaries, graduations, and weddings. One couple, married anyway but changed from Plan A - formal wedding and sit-down dinner reception, to Plan B. Tyler and Melanie Tapajna were married in August. Upon cancelling the reception, they received a refund from the venue. But they decided to donate the food to a local shelter for women and children. The beneficiaries of their generosity, Laura's Home, is part of the City Mission of Cleveland. The catering food truck pulled right up to their kitchen, and - with the help of the couple in their wedding attire - they served one hundred meals.

After serving, the appropriately masked couple, greeted the guests as they dined. Rich Trickel, the Director of City Mission, said this was a first in his experience with the Mission.

You are cordially invited...The pleasure of your company is requested...SAVE THIS DATE!

Perhaps you have received a card inscribed with that message. There is a big upcoming event - a wedding and banquet following - and you are invited. It is several months

away...but the couple wants an RSVP now, that way they will know how many meals to order from the caterer. So, you reply affirmatively, with every intention of being in attendance on that day. You mail off the RSVP and you mark your calendar.

Time goes by. Life intervenes. The day arrives. The host's servant returns to say: "Dinner will be ready in 90 minutes." What happens? All those who previously had accepted the invitation, now offer an excuse.

What is your go-to excuse??

I have been so busy lately, I am tired. My car is in the shop. I cannot find a babysitter. The dog ate my homework.

I must go and inspect some real estate I just purchased.

I just bought a new car and need to take it for a spin. I just got married, and I need to pay attention to my darling spouse. (Actually, the OT law allowed for new husbands to be exempt from military service and several other obligations, so maybe this was a legitimate excuse.)

People are polite, but clearly preoccupied with activities that now take priority over attendance at the feast, and relationship with the host. Of course, all of us are concerned with family, with career, with own personal affairs - but in this parable, these leave no room for the relationship with God, who is the host!

For a moment, put yourself in the sandals of the host. You have put thought into the guest list. You sent your servant out in plenty of time, well in advance of the day of the big event, to invite folks and ask them to "Save this date!" You received the promises/acceptances of the guests who would be in attendance.

The feast day has arrived! The house has been cleaned, the menu designed, the food shopped for and prepared. Everything is ready. The servant is sent out to remind the guests that the banquet is imminent. He returns with news: None - not one - of the original guests is coming. Each one offered his or her excuse. How does this feel? You thought these were your friends. You believed there was some degree of connection or commitment between you...but no. They have failed to show up. In a culture which highly values hospitality, this is a serious breach of etiquette.

The host is angry!! Wouldn't you be angry??

But the host resolves that nothing shall be wasted!

The host does not hesitate. The servant is sent out again, this time to invite folks who live on the fringes of society: the poor, crippled, blind, lame. It appears that these are eager to come to the banquet!

The servant reports to the host: Yes, many of these marginalized people have eagerly responded to your invitation...but there is room for more! At this, the host instructs the servant to expand the search further, to go outside the city limits and into the country, because the host wants his house to be *full*. *Everyone* who comes will have a place at the table. *The invitation is open to all who will respond.*

But what is this parable really about? Remember Jesus is telling it to people who are already at a banquet, at a sit-down dinner in the home of a Pharisee. Jesus cannot really be giving an etiquette lesson on first century manners, can he? I think not. What is Jesus really getting at?

All of those hearing this parable are aware of the importance, the near sacredness of hospitality. For instance, the Passover meal commemorates an historical event - the Exodus - when God liberated Israel from bondage in Egypt. The food that is served is symbolic of that life-changing event. Similarly, the Lord's Supper /Communion/Eucharist, is a "meal" which signifies our liberation from bondage to sin, a memorial of Christ's death on the cross, and our eager anticipation of the Risen Christ's return. In Revelation, the marriage supper of the Lamb, signifies the consummation of the Kingdom of God!

Given this significance, the focus of the meal in the parable is not on the food, the décor, the attire, or the guest list. The focus is on the relationship of the guests to the host. Everyone is invited to this banquet. But the invitation is time sensitive. It is not open-ended. Those who first refused, will not be allowed even a morsel of the banquet, according to the last verse.

On occasion I have had people ask me: If God is so loving and gracious, how could God ever send any one to hell or refuse anyone entrance to heaven?

The answer - according to this parable - is that God refuses no one. God is the host who invites everyone and is eager for all to come to the table. WE are the ones who exclude ourselves, with our own excuses and choices. The invitation is open now, but God will not wait forever. It is ours to accept or reject God's gracious invitation. Not to decide, is to decide!

To come to the table, is to enter into a relationship with the Living God, who wants to meet our deepest needs there: Our need for nourishment, yes. But more than physical nourishment. God wants to bring us into an intimate, personal relationship with God's very Self. In God's presence, we receive the infinitely good gift a relationship with our Creator and Sustainer. There we find our true home.

At the Table today, through Communion, we receive the life-renewing power of God's Spirit who renews us daily; who grows in us Christ-like character or the "fruit of the Spirit" (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control -Galatians 3:28). Our hearts desires become one with God's desires, so that we can remain strong when faced with trials and temptations.

Finally, the great banquet symbolizes God's desire to re-orient our hearts so that we are in sync with God's heart; * our priorities are in alignment with God's Kingdom priorities: We will be careful stewards of this earth and all that is in it.

We will balance work and rest;

We will seek to live out God's justice tempered with mercy in all our relationships, and balance personal freedom with corporate responsibility, as we seek to live more like Jesus, day by day. (*"Heart Throb" by Dan Meyer)

It is to this table, it is into this relationship with the Living God through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit - that you and I have been invited! This invitation has eternal consequences. It is easy to make excuses. It is harder to accept the invitation and enter into a life-changing relationship with the Living God!

What will you decide? You are invited...God awaits your reply.

Let us pray.

Lord, we can offer many excuses. Today may we be so overwhelmed by your love and your desire for us to be your children, that we will forsake all other things and come to the table...to be received and welcomed whole heartedly, to experience forgiveness and a new beginning. Fill us with your abundance today as we partake of this Communion, that our hearts may beat as one with yours. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Today people all around the globe will join us at God's banquet table. In small towns and urban centers, indoors/ socially distanced, outdoors in the open air. In every time zone...in every language People will gather to give God praise and partake of the gifts of God, for the people of God! No excuses! All are welcome!