



***First Things First:***  
**"YOU COME, TOO!"**

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*On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.*

*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

*He said also to the one who had invited him, "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. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..." (Luke 14:1-14)*

Robert Frost wrote a deceptively simple poem called "The Pasture," which is one of my favorites:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long. – You come too.

This poem about a New England farmer cleaning out the pasture spring appeals to me. It's such a simple, unforced invitation. It's calming. He has a simple chore to do and clearly he enjoys it. It's going to be good for his soul. Would you like to come along, too?

It's 'inviting' in an interesting way. Does he want help? Company? Does he think maybe you'll find joy in this simple activity? It just feels good. And, strangely, it reminds me of what we are charged to do when we leave here on Sundays. Let me explain.

Our Gospel lesson also starts with an invitation. A Pharisee asks Jesus to his home for dinner with his Pharisee friends—and this is not just any Pharisee, but the Grand Poobah of the whole district. It's like Sunday dinner at one of our homes, only everybody there is a *Pharisee*. For Jesus it likely felt more like an examination by the Board of Ordained Ministry. "*Everybody's* watching him," Luke says.

On the way Jesus sees this guy who has edema, legs swollen with fluid. He turns to this "frown of Pharisees" (I call them a "frown" because that catches their attitude.) Jesus asks this frown of Pharisees, "Hey, is it okay to heal on the Sabbath?" They can't answer, so he heals this guy. Then Jesus asks this frown of Pharisees, "Come on, wouldn't you do the same thing for one of your kids?" We're off to an awkward start here.

They get to the house, and Jesus watches this group of proud Pharisees jockey for position at the table. So Jesus gives them *Miss Manners*. He instructs them in the finer points of spiritual table-etiquette, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, sit in the lowest place..."

I remember watching a group of four year olds at a preschool one day lining up to go to the playground. They were pushing and shoving and shouting because they all wanted to be as close as possible to the head of the line. The teacher intervened or they might have clobbered each other. But this is not unusual behavior for four year olds. Then that same day, through traffic I was cut off three different times by rude drivers who gladly risked their lives and mine to get where they were going five seconds sooner. But in this age of road rage, this is not unusual behavior for drivers who are still acting like four year olds.

Many people never get past nursery school when it comes to that inner drive to be first in line. They push and shove and shout to get ahead of everybody else. And the culture encourages it in a thousand ways. The drive to be first fuels so many struggles for power and prestige. It inspires the arrogance and selfishness and cutthroat competition that will lie, cheat and steal to win, even if it means losing your soul. Well, we all want to be the champs. We all want to reach the top of the heap. We all want to have front row seats—unless we're in church. We want to put other people in their place so we can take our place of privilege. We want to sit at the head table, just like the Pharisees.

Anthropologists speak of "the language of meals." In every culture, meals are one of the most direct ways people connect with each other. Meals are especially important in the Gospel of Luke. In the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the way Jesus is recognized in "the breaking of bread," the common meal of the early church where no one goes hungry—these are all pictures

of the God's banquet of heaven. Imagine that: heaven and the church described as a party, one great feast. Isn't that a lovely way to think of the church?

I mean, some people think of the church as a place to be serious, and some see it as a lecture, and some want it to be a place to attack other people so they can feel good about themselves. But Jesus uses the images of a party, a banquet, a feast. What would it be like if we all thought of church as coming to a party?

Now, this brood of Pharisees knows exactly what Jesus *means* when he says, "When you are invited to a wedding banquet" because the wedding banquet was one of the chief ways they described heaven in those days. Don't think of a formal sit-down in suit and tie and formal dress. You haven't partied until you've been to a Jewish wedding, which were held in homes in those days, and which often lasted for days. Remember John's gospel, where Jesus turned six gigantic jars of water into wine to keep the party going? There was some heavy partying going on there.

According to Luke, heaven is a feast and the church is a party. Really, that's what we're saying when we invite somebody to church: "Come to the party. Come join the joy!"

I'm afraid not many churches look like they are having fun. Why is that? Are we just too serious? Are we too sour and critical, like that brood of Pharisees? Have we forgotten how good God has been to us, how God has invited and included us—even us—and how much we are loved, how much we've been forgiven?

Here's the church I want to join: of all places, the church should be one unending party of laughter and fun. But we act like a gaggle of Pharisees, like four year olds, jockeying for position, forcing others out of the way.

Here's spiritual etiquette tip #1: "Start at the bottom!" Jesus tells them. "Start at the foot of the table. Maybe the host will call you up. Maybe you'll love the people there so it won't matter to you. Maybe you'll learn there is no high and low at God's table because everybody gets enough and everybody is equal in God's eyes. Because there's no sense inviting people unless we've got a party where they'll be loved and welcomed and treated like honored guests."

But there's more. Jesus suddenly turns to the Grand Poobah of this phalanx of Pharisees and scolds him. He criticizes him for his choice of guests. Etiquette tip #2: "When you give a party, don't invite your lawyers or bankers or friends. You'll just get paid back. But invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." One New Testament scholar, commenting on this passage, said, "I'm certainly glad I wasn't at that dinner party." When you throw a dinner party, who do you invite?

Noted American evangelist Tony Campolo tells of visiting an all-night diner in Hawaii while suffering from jet lag, unable to sleep. From his booth he overheard a conversation among several "ladies of the night." One said that the next day would be her thirty-ninth birthday. Sadly, she confessed that she had never in her life had a birthday party. Now most people would just think, "How sad." But Rev. Campolo secretly arranged with the manager of the diner to throw a

surprise party for the woman. The next night the woman and her friends were stunned and thrilled with a cake and this strange guy leading the diner in singing “Happy Birthday!” And Tony led the group in prayer. Later, the diner manager asked Tony, “What kind of church do you belong to?” He replied, “I belong to the kind of church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.”

How distasteful. But you and I know: that’s Jesus’ kind of church. Because that’s who God is looking for. They can come. And God invites us, though we are also among the unworthy. We’re invited, too.

Could anything be more counter-cultural to the values of our day? Can you imagine hearing such things from our political candidates or the nightly news? Who cares about the poor, about strangers, or prisoners these days? Where are you going to hear that God’s priorities need to be our priorities? That you and I—even now—are to keep God, the first thing, first. What we see here is that which is most distinctive in Christianity. God invites and welcomes us. All of us. That’s why we come here. To remember who we are. To remember that true life is found in putting God first.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? The party we throw here in God’s House isn’t for us. It’s not about planning a party for ourselves. It’s about going out into the streets and urgently inviting everyone we see. We’re invited to serve one another. So many of you here live God’s Open Invitation beautifully every day. We are invited to make this a place of joy for whoever enters. We’re actually ordered to go out of here, beyond our walls, inviting others in. Because it’s not really God’s party, you know, if anybody’s left out.

Oh, Jesus is stirring up this frown of Pharisees. They didn’t like the way Jesus challenged their “We’re In, You’re Out” game. They didn’t like the kind of rabble he welcomed along. His closest associates were fishermen, squabblers, a doubter, a betrayer and an IRS agent, along with a group of women, of all people. And now, he’s telling them to include the marginalized and dispossessed, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” whom the Pharisees just knew were out of God’s favor. “No,” Jesus says, “they’re in, too.”

Some of you know Luke wrote a sequel we call The Book of Acts. And in Acts the Spirit pushes the church to include all kinds of people they don’t want to include. A dirty Samaritan gets in. A Eunuch gets in. The Gentile dogs get in. Even priests and Pharisees get in. This is tough stuff. It certainly means God includes the people we love that other religious types would keep out. But it also means God includes the people you don’t like, and sends you to invite them to the party.

And let’s face it: we all have some people we don’t like. But as followers of Christ, we’re at the foot of the table, don’t you see. Last in line. We don’t get in ‘til everybody gets in.

So as a church, “Come to the party!” And invite everybody to join in with you. Once again, we’re invited to the Table today, the Lord’s Table, and whether you’re a member here or a guest, there’s room at this table for you.

Young and old, male and female, black and white, big and small, tall and short, rich and poor, come to the Table. Our God loves a party, all colors of balloons included, the more the merrier. For heaven's sake, for God's sake, let's make this a place of joy, a shelter from the storms of life, a haven for the weary and a home for outcast. Yet, when we come to the table, Christ's Table, let's make sure all are welcome.

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