

Come to the Feast

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Isaiah 55:1-3, Luke 14:15-24

The Parable of the Great Banquet

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

¹⁶ Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At 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 make them come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' "

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A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter.

"This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, *"At your wedding."*

Speaking of food, a young couple invited their elderly pastor for Sunday dinner. While they were in the kitchen preparing the meal, the minister asked their son what they were having.

"Goat," the little boy replied.

"Goat?" replied the startled man of the cloth, *"Are you sure about that?"*

"Yep," said the youngster. *"I heard Dad say to Mom, 'Today is just as good as any to have the old goat for dinner.'"*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Lk 14:15–24). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

There are some dinner parties you may want to pass up. The food may not be all that appetizing or all that satisfying. And the company may not be all that gratifying.

But there is one dinner party that would be sheer folly to miss. The food is downright heavenly. It's a veritable feast! Did you know you were invited? We all are!

In fact, the table is already set, the food is prepared; everything is ready. Come and eat!

It's not about ham and eggs. It's not about steak and potatoes. It's not about burgers and beer. It's a feast of the spiritual kind; it's a feast for the starving soul and the empty heart. The Lord is throwing a party. He is the gracious host and we are his invited guests. And he invites us to come and celebrate his presence. The Lord is with us! In fact, he is the very life of the party. He is a perfectly delightful host. Jesus' feast is a feast of his presence, and that brings true joy.

Jesus' feast is also a feast of liberation. The free people of the world are there at the dinner table, rejoicing with the One who liberated them. The sick are healed, the lame can walk, the blind can see, broken relationships are restored. It's a feast of freedom to which Jesus calls us.

And it's a feast of truth -- truth which is the bread and meat of life -- the truth upon which we base our values, decisions and actions. At his banquet we hear his word and learn the truth about life, about *our* lives. It's a feast for those in the dark about life's meaning and direction.

And it's a feast of comfort and assurance. God himself walks with us in the crises of life and gives us true peace.

All this is and more is planned by the King of Heaven! It's a feast of gigantic proportions! He offers the richest of fare, satisfying the hungriest heart. The invitation goes out:

- 55 "Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
 and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without cost.
² Why spend money on what is not bread,
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
 and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
³ Give ear and come to me;
 hear me, that your soul may live.
 I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
 my faithful love promised to David.²

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Is 55:1–3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

It's almost inconceivable that anyone would refuse such a gracious offer as this: presence, love, joy, freedom, truth, comfort and assurance.....all this and more.

"But they all alike began to make excuses and made light of the invitation." So goes the parable Jesus told as he sat at table with some Pharisees -- who were the good church people of his day. Jesus' was telling them a story about a very important man who issued an invitation to a great feast, but one by one the invited expressed their regrets.

"I'm sorry I cannot come to the feast, but I just bought a piece of land and I better go check it out."

Here is a person who puts the claim of business first in his life. Priority must be given to the important transaction, the new property deal, all the emails to which he must respond. He's got to be at the office. He's much too busy to accept an invitation to a feast. It just doesn't fit into his agenda. His plate is too full.

Then there is a man who bought five new pairs of oxen. *"Please excuse me"* he says, *"for I have to test them out."*

This is a person whose passion is new things. He's got a new toy. Complete and undivided attention is given to the new car, the new boat, the new hobby. There is no time for anything else. *"Please send my regrets, I wish I could but....."*

And then there is a man who, when invited, simply said, *"I am married and cannot come. I've got to take care of my wife."*

This is a man who gives absolute priority to family life. That's a noble sentiment, to be sure. Family responsibilities and obligations are extremely important, no doubt about that, but more important than attending a feast for the soul? Must one not take care of his soul first, before he can properly care for his family?

This is a hard parable, for you and I are asked whether we are among the excuse-makers who refuse the invitation to enter into a rich relationship with the Lord of the banquet. Are we among the invited guests who are too preoccupied and whose lives are too cluttered to accept his gracious invitation? Are we so distracted by lesser priorities that we have no time to feast at Jesus' table and know his joy? Is there so much "stuff" in our lives that the Lord has become crowded out?

The pastor of the church I grew up in stopped in the middle of his sermon one Sunday and used an illustration that has stuck with me all these years. He asked if there was someone ten years old in the congregation.

A girl came forward and the pastor gave her a number of things to hold--things that a ten year old would like--soda pop, candy bars, some toys, stuffed animals He kept giving her things until she could hold no more. And he promised that she could keep these things.

Then he took her over to the communion table and offered to give her communion, explaining how the bread and cup were the signs of Christ's presence. Then he told her that she would have to drop all these things to take it, and would then have to pass on all that stuff to someone else.

Well, she wasn't very different from a lot of us; she decided to keep her soda pop and toys. She was all tied up with what she had -- her hands were full. In order to be free she had to let go and let God into her life.

It was St. Augustine who once said that God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.

It's true, isn't it? Lesser priorities so easily crowd God out.

The problem is, it is *good* things that tend to crowd God out. It is good things that we love too much that can come between us and God. Someone has rightly pointed out that the road to hell is paved not with crimes and scandals but with things that are quite harmless in themselves, but they quickly become dangerous if they take on a false importance in our lives. Our business, our pleasure, our material possessions, even our family life can become idolatrous if they become more important than God. Even our church activities can keep us away from Christ and his feast.

What happens in the story Jesus told? The purpose of the gracious host is not thwarted; the servants go out into the streets and byways and bring in others who are more open to the offer of divine love and grace.

But the Lord must grieve when people he loves spurn his invitation. You will notice that the Lord always respects human freedom. He never forces anyone to come to the party. It's sad; he offers so much. The Lord truly sets a table of love. His food really satisfies the human heart - and yet many of us go our merry way, oblivious to the most important invitation we could ever receive in this life.

The good news is that the invitation is still open -- for how long we do not know -- but there is still time to come to the feast, time to experience the love, warmth, and grace of a personal relationship with God.

But before we come you and I must sit down and examine our lives and ask ourselves a tough question: What habit, or pursuit or object, harmless though it may be in itself, is keeping me from God? What should I let go of? What is keeping me from coming to the Lord's banqueting table?

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God" says Jesus. Is there anything more important than our relationship with God? Listen to him speak in scripture. Meditate on his promises. Consciously seek to walk with him day by day. We really can go to the feast if we want to. It is all a matter of priorities. It is a matter of our life's focus.

Jesus Christ is this very moment extending his invitation to you and me to come to the feast he has prepared. We have the freedom to accept it or to reject it. Not to decide is to reject it. We may never get a second chance. Now is the time to respond. RSVP!

Come! Everything is now ready! The table has been set for you and me. The great feast is prepared. Let us come and eat to our heart's true satisfaction . . .

Dear Lord,

Lord, thank you for inviting us to your banqueting table of love. What a gracious and generous invitation. On this Independence Day, we know it to be a feast of freedom. Certainly there is no greater feeling of liberation than to experience this freedom from sin and death that you have provided for us through Jesus Christ. Today our hearts and our souls are free to praise you. For this we are very thankful.

On this Independence Day we are reminded of all those who have sacrificed for our freedom, following the example of your Son, Jesus Christ. Let me not take our freedom, both physical and spiritual, for granted. May we always remember that our freedom was purchased with a very high price. Our freedom cost others their very lives.

Lord, today, bless those who have served and continue to give their lives for our freedom. With favor and with great bounty meet their needs and watch over their families.

Help us live our lives in a way that glorifies you, Lord. Give each one of us the strength to be a blessing in someone else's life today, and grant us the opportunity to lead others into the freedom that can be found in knowing Christ. Amen