

It's Party Time!

As most of you know, I didn't grow up in the church, and so I really only began to connect holidays like Christmas and Easter with the church when I became a follower of Jesus as a young adult. Among those early memories was going to the 11:00 Christmas Eve service at the Springville Baptist Church. Along with braving a few Western New York snowstorms to get there, my most lasting memories of those Christmas Eves include stopping at the parsonage on our way to church for the open house hosted by the pastor and his wife—Dave and Doris Bevington. I liked this tradition so much that when I became a pastor I naturally wanted to do the same thing.

So on one of our first Christmases at the Chazy church—I don't remember if it was our first or second—Lorri and I decided to have our own open house. In the days leading up to the big event we did a lot of straightening and house cleaning. Lorri baked cookies and treats, and on Christmas Eve day, we moved the dining room furniture around to make it easier for people to get to the goodies. A good friend from church, Barb, volunteered to help with the final preparations and with the hostess duties that evening. When evening came, it wouldn't be fair to say that no one showed up, but the turnout was definitely underwhelming. It was so underwhelming in fact that we chalked it up as a lesson learned and never tried it again.

Have you ever thrown a party only to have no one come? Or have you felt the sting of wanting to get friends and loved ones together only to have all the calendars and phones come flying out, and finding yourself bombarded with excuses for why they couldn't do it? How did that feel?

If you've had an experience like this, it puts you squarely in the world we find ourselves in as we read the 14th chapter of Luke. As we enter the story Jesus is eating dinner in the home of a Pharisee when someone pipes up and says, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

And as Jesus does so often, he takes this as an opportunity to tell another of his little stories. This one is about a person who "gave a great dinner and invited many." And although he doesn't say it in so many words, his point is that the kingdom of God is like a great, big, wonderful party!

Now from reading the gospels we know that Jesus liked a good party. In the gospel of John he began his public ministry at a wedding, and he even performed his first miracle to make sure that there was enough wine for everyone to drink. And we've already observed in reading Luke that every time Jesus turns around he seems to be at another party at someone's house! In chapter 5, Luke tells of a great banquet that Levi the tax collector gave for him. Here in chapter 14 he's eating dinner with a bunch of Pharisees. He truly was an "equal-opportunity" dinner guest – so much so that some of his critics accused him of being "a drunkard and a glutton." (Luke 7:34) And, of course, Jesus hosted a few dinner parties of his own. He fed the multitudes on the shore of the

Sea of Galilee, and practically his last act was to celebrate the Passover with his disciples.

The point it is this: the kingdom of God is a party! It's a celebration! So why would anyone want to miss it?

But in the parable, and in the real world, God invites us to this wonderful party but too often it seems like no one shows up—especially those who ought to know him best. But why should that be? I'd like to suggest two reasons—one that comes directly from the parable and one that is a little further away. Let's begin with that second one.

Sometimes, people don't show up for the party because they forget that it's a party! And I think that some of the fault lies with people like me. We preachers can make it seem like this great feast is sometime far off in the future. But the reality is that with the coming of Jesus into the world the party has already begun.

But Luke actually does a much better job of saying this. He begins the gospel in a way that makes it practically a musical, with Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, and Mary the mother of Jesus—bursting into song to celebrate the birth of God's Son—not to mention the angels in that heavenly host. Jesus himself begins his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth by quoting from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In the Old Testament this “year of the Lord’s favor” was known as the year of Jubilee. Jesus invites us to a jubilee of healing and wholeness and reconciliation and justice and peace. But how easily we forget that.

He invites us to a celebration, but we have a way of turning that celebration into an obligation. There’s something of human nature in this, too. We have a way of taking good things we love to do, and turning them into onerous responsibilities that we end up hating. As many of you also know, I began college intending to be a music major—in fact that was the main reason why I chose the college I went to. But I struggled through my first semester as a music major, to the extent that my cello teacher asked me to come and meet with him outside my regular lesson time to try to figure out what was going wrong. I went home for the weekend just before that meeting and in that short time away I realized that there was something inside me that resisted the idea of turning music into my job. For me, making it work instead of play took all the joy out of it. And so I went back to school, I met with my teacher and we agreed that I should change my major to math—which I didn’t mind thinking of as a job. My teacher, Dr. Richardson, also offered to keep me on as student—he even basically just gave me an ‘A’ every semester so I didn’t have to worry about my grade. And making music became a joy again.

Has following Jesus become an obligation for you? Have you come to see worship and prayer as burdens? Has serving people in Jesus’ name lost its

joy? Maybe you've lost sight of why you do these things—that Jesus has invited us to be part of his great celebration of life and love.

I'm not saying that joining this party doesn't cost us anything. But I'm reminded of what Jesus said in the 13th chapter of Matthew, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; and then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." (Matthew 13:44). If we think it's going to be a great party, we're willing to rearrange our calendars and shine our shoes, maybe even buy some new party clothes. That's how it is with the kingdom of God.

But now, at last, we get to the heart of Jesus' parable. It turns out that it's precisely the people who should have known what a great party it was going to be who didn't show up. When the host sends out his servant to remind everyone that the big day has arrived, they all start making excuses. Although this party seemed like a great idea that the time they were first invited, now there are other things that suddenly seem more important to his guests. In the examples Jesus gives, two of them have discovered that they have business to attend to. Another one has gotten married. Even though they knew what to expect, there were things that were more important—or at least more urgent—to them.

We probably don't have too much trouble agreeing that those first two excuses seem pretty lame—especially since we've seen how often Jesus speaks of the love of material possessions getting in the way of following him. But what about the third one? Family always comes first, doesn't it? But here in Luke,

Jesus challenges us to consider that family can become an idol, too. In fact, some of Jesus' hardest words on both these subjects will come later in this same chapter. He says in verse 26, "Whoever comes after me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." And in verse 33, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." He's speaking in black-and-white prophet-mode here, but he's doing it to wake people up. He has invited us to his great feast. We might just need to rearrange our calendars or get a baby-sitter! Is there anything that you will let get in the way of saying yes to his invitation?

The big twist in the parable comes at this point. Even though the first people the host invited to his party all come up with their excuses, the host is determined that the party will go on! So he sends out his servant again—this time to invite "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"—and when there's still room at the table he sends him out again, even further afield, to practically drag in anyone who's willing to come. He invites people who don't take it for granted that they will get invited to great feasts. He invites those who don't often get to eat a good, rich meal. He invites those who see it as a privilege—those who don't get invited to so many parties that they've gotten bored with the whole thing and see it as a burden.

As we read this parable it's possible to put ourselves into it in a couple of different places. Are you like one of those people on the first guest list? Have

you forgotten that Jesus has invited you to be part of something wonderful—to participate in his reign of righteous and justice, of holiness and peace? Or do you see yourself as one of the people on second guest list—as one of the poor the crippled the blind and the lame? In either case, can you grasp how greatly you are loved and welcomed? Can you feel how much joy our Lord has in seeing you at his banquet table? Is there anything you will let get in the way of being there?

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March 18, 2018*