

Keeping the Feast¹

Our parable today is embedded in a dinner party where Jesus is the guest of a prominent religion leader. I'm imagining a leading citizen, one who is bright and respected, planning a party that mixes interesting people for stimulating conversation and a sense of being on the cutting edge of things. And Jesus is invited. The upper crust crowd of the day doesn't fight the crowds and the hot sun to hear Jesus' open air teaching sessions. They simply invite the teacher over for dinner and a private interview.

I'm imagining that the dinner party has reached the cigars and brandy stage—of course they didn't have such things—but everyone's eaten and the guests can devote themselves to conversation. Attention focuses on Jesus. The educated guests, theologians all, are probing and looking Jesus over pretty carefully. They want to politely cross-examine him. Get a bead on his ideas. What makes this guy so popular? What's his intellectual pedigree?

One of the guests makes a comment. "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" It's not a question. It's kind of a statement of faith. It's the kind of a statement

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 5, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange Georgia. Additional sermons and information about First Presbyterian, LaGrange, may be found at www.fpclagrange.org.

that everybody is supposed to greet approvingly, or lift their glasses and say, "here here."

What Jesus is supposed to say is something that signals his agreement. He might say, "Hopefully, we'll all keep the law faithfully, so that when that great day comes, we'll all be counted worthy to sit with the messiah at his victory banquet."

But of course, that's not what Jesus says. He tells a little story about a great banquet, a banquet that parallels the great feast of the Messiah envisioned when God's ultimate victory is won for good at the end of time. This story steers everybody's thinking in a completely unpredictable direction. "A man gave a great banquet and invited many." Just at the point when the hall was decorated, the table set, and the band at the ready, the guests began to cop excuses why they couldn't come. We all understand this. Sometimes, even in the South, there's a birthday party, a reception, a social that we just don't want to bother with. So, we come up with an excuse. "Oh, I'd love to be there but..."

The thing about these excuses is that they are so lame, as young people would say. Without getting into the Middle East background, it would be impossible that someone would buy a parcel of land or a domestic animal and not have thoroughly studied it. These excuses are insulting after the fashion of

the girl who turns down a potential date by saying that she has to wash her hair that night. The real message, both from the girl and from the would-be guests, is that I don't have time for you. I don't want to hang out with you.

Jesus' story goes on. The banquet host turns his ire over the insult of his guests into a form of grace. He sends his servants out into the skid rows and soup kitchens to compel guests to come in. The story ends with a bizarre image—poor people, street people, the wrong people—sitting at the damask laid tables that were intended to be set for the pretty people and social leaders. All of a sudden the pious image of a idealized, remote Messianic Banquet to be held someday at the end of time with all the good people sitting around the Lord gives way to Jesus' image of homeless people and bag ladies trying to figure out what to do with the napkin rings and salad forks.

The Parable of the Great Banquet goes in a totally unpredictable direction. The problem, so far as the Kingdom of God is concerned, isn't being good enough to get an invitation. It's being smart enough or wise enough to accept the invitation.

What this scene from Jesus' ministry says to me is that a great, a consequential, a heroic life has been offered to me. Will I have the heart and wisdom to accept it?

I've told Ted's story before but I'll repeat it here because it perfectly embodies the burden of this sermon. Ted grew up in a weird family. His mother would give him his dinner on a tray and he'd eat it in his bedroom watching television. But in Ted's early 20's he met Cindy. They fell in love. Under pressure from Cindy, Ted finished college. They were married. Bought a home. And had twins—who went on to graduate first and second from their class. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Back when the twins were babies, Ted would frequent a bar. Well in that environment he met Renee and became way too friendly with her. One winter when both the babies were unceasingly sick with ear aches, Ted decided that he couldn't take it anymore and he walked out. Went to stay with Renee.

I got involved with Ted and Cindy only to the degree that they wanted me to recommend a counselor. Well I did a very good job. I was able to get them an appointment with, what I deemed the most or second most, effective counselor in Dayton, Ohio. And they went. Ted was born unlucky, but married wisely, had two great kids, a college degree and a home. And he'd made a terrible mistake and had one good shot of getting back on track. Unfortunately, Ted didn't like the counselor's no-nonsense approach. The counselor didn't sugar coat it. "Ted, you need to make a commitment to commit yourself entirely to your family

and making amends. If you can't do that, we can all save my time and your money." Ted walked out of the office. He never saw his boy's graduation.

Transfer this to what Jesus is teaching us today. The question isn't whether you or I have an invitation to the Great Banquet. The question is whether we will accept it or forever be finding an excuse to do something less.

I'll bet that the elementary teachers here today and many of the parents as well are familiar with Norton Juster's children's book, The Phantom Tollbooth. It's a wise and fanciful tale of a little boy named Milo who is traveling through an imaginary landscape meeting all kinds of characters. One of the most memorable is a man named the Terrible Trivium. The Terrible Trivium kindly invites Milo and his dog to help him by transferring grains of sand from one pile to another with tweezers. Milo calculates that finishing the job will take over 800 years. With this the Terrible Trivium becomes quite menacing.

"What could be more important than doing unimportant things? If you stop to do enough of them, you'll never get to where you're going." He punctuated his last remark with a villainous laugh.

"Then you must ----" gasped Milo.

"Quite correct!" he shrieked triumphantly. "I am the Terrible Trivium, demon of petty tasks and worthless jobs, ogre of wasted effort, and monster of habit."

Think, this was published in 1961 well before Facebook and 150 channel television. Isn't the life that follows in Jesus' footsteps the glorious opposite of an existence of never ending unimportant tasks?

One of the things about walking through life under the direction and instruction of Jesus Christ is that we realize more and more just how consequential and glorious a life we're engaged in. The original disciples were fishermen were captivated with an itinerant teacher who was passing through and they followed him. By stages they witnessed Jesus interacting with people and teaching. Surely, they must have gasped deeply within themselves and thought, "My gosh, this man and this life is huge. It gets bigger every day." At length the disciples found themselves caught up in a movement that would rock the Roman Empire. We now know that they had signed with the movement that would rock the cosmos and heal the world. And it's still getting bigger.

Friends, that's the life we're invited into. When we gather around the Lord's Table, we're really gathering around the Messianic Banquet. I say this because Jesus has taught us that we aren't going to have to wait until the end of time for the Kingdom to come breaking in. The Kingdom has arrived. And we're invited.

But will we accept the invitation? Or, do we have something else agitating for our attention? If so is it worthy? Does it matter? Or is the call of Jesus Christ, summoning each of us by name, just about the grandest opportunity to live and to matter that anyone could hope for?