

Series: Life Stories
Part I: Room for Everyone
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
June 3, 2018

If we look in the Bible and read the words of Jesus, we find that Jesus' favorite way of teaching seemed to be parables. Parables are not simply, as I was taught as a child in Sunday School, "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." That may be okay for kids, but I think there is more to it than just that. As I mentioned in my "Reflections" blog this week, one person has suggested that some of the parables are actually heavenly stories with earthly meanings. They are more like riddles, often with a twist or a "Gotcha" that invites us to see life differently -- from God's perspective. Another person said that in parables, it is as if we are walking along and we fall through a trap door that leads us to a deeper level of meaning. Parables are meant to tease our imaginations and evoke in us new ways of seeing and living. That is why we are calling this new series of messages "Life Stories." I think these parables of Jesus help us to hear the good news in a way that shows us the way of life God desires for all of us.

Today's parable is from Luke 14:15-24:

When 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." Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' "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.' "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' "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.' " "Sir," the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' "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. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'" (Luke 14:15-24, NIV)

My guess is that most of us know what is going on in this story, though the cultural context might be a little different. Jesus was eating at the house of a "prominent Pharisee" probably with others of the religious and social elite of the Jewish community. Someone at the table exclaims, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." (Luke 14:15, NIV) Jesus had just been talking to those gathered there about the social conventions of where you should sit at dinner, as well as whom you should invite. But then Jesus decided to tell this parable about a host who had a great banquet. It was the custom to invite folks beforehand to the banquet, asking them to save the date, but to wait until the actual day of the event to tell them when all of the festivities were ready. But, when the day of the banquet came, some of the guests who said they were coming changed their minds and offered various excuses.

Maybe it would be like a friend inviting us to their home for a meal. The host is going to ask a cross-section of people you may not normally associate with, but because the host is your friend, and you have nothing else planned that night, you say you are coming. But then a few days later, you get another invitation in the mail. It is printed on the finest paper. You open it. It is for an event and says that this will be “the social event of the year.” All of the social elite and the “movers and shakers” in Atlanta will all be there – and you are invited! It would be a great time to network for your business. The invitation also says the location will be a brand new venue downtown that everyone is talking about.

Finally, it says to bring your children or your grandchildren, if you have any, because there will be a nationally-known children's TV personality to entertain the kids during the event. Your kids find out about this and they beg you to go. But, you check the date -- it is the same night as the first event you had already told your friend you would attend.

So, what would you do? Would you go to the first event and plan to enjoy the people? Or, would you go to the first event, but secretly wish you were at the other one? Maybe you would create an excuse about something new that just came up relating to work or family. Or, would you conveniently “forget” about the first event and hope your friend doesn't see the selfies you post on Facebook? Of course the right thing to do is the first one, but my guess is that many of us would at least consider the other options.

Now if I were to ask what this parable is about, many of us might say, “Well, God is like the host who gave a great banquet, but we make excuses about why we can't go.” Maybe it would be like God's offer of grace or God's invitation to come to worship, but we come up with other things to do instead. Maybe.

In the parable, none of the excuses given are bad things. The first excuse has to do with *work*, and we all need to work to support ourselves and our families. The second excuse has to do with something *new* – like a new car we want to drive in the country, or a new lake house. The third excuse is about *family*, and of course family is important. Maybe we could even see this invitation to the great banquet as similar to our worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, like we will celebrate later on – but we just have something else to do. It is something many of us still struggle with.

If you were here during our church-wide “Dare To Dream” visioning gatherings, you know we talked about the megatrend of declining worship attendance. People are just attending church less often. This is not only affecting JCPC or Presbyterian churches; this is affecting all churches -- even the larger mega-churches. During one of our “Dare to Dream” sessions, I shared what researcher David Murrow suggests are “Nine Possible Reasons Why Worship Attendance is Declining.”

1. Social expectations and pressures have lightened
2. Church is no longer the best show in town
3. Increased mobility
4. Weekend work
5. People need a day of rest

6. The rise of do-it-yourself Christianity
7. The expectation of choice
8. The most faithful saints are burning out
9. Churches increasingly model individuality in weekly worship and teaching

("Why is church attendance declining – even among committed Christians?" March 7, 2016, by David Murrow in Pantheos -- <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/churchformen/2016/03/why-is-church-attendance-declining-even-among-christians/>)

So, we could say that this parable was about the need for each of us to look at our own lives and the excuses we use for not attending worship. Now while I think there is some value here and that some of that is probably true -- *I don't think that is primarily what this parable is about*. The reason is because of what the host does right after these excuses are given in the parable, and because of what happened just before this parable. If we go back to the beginning of chapter 14 in Luke, (which we did not have time to read this morning), we will see that Jesus is at the home of what Luke describes as a "prominent Pharisee." (Luke 14:1, NIV) Jesus notices that the guests have been placed around the table according to their social standing, which was common in that day. The higher up you were on the social ladder, the closer you were to the seat of honor. The meal reinforced the social order. So, Jesus tells the other guests that when they are invited to an event like this, do not automatically go to the place of highest honor thinking you belong there, only to find out later that you don't. You may even be asked by the host to move.

I can remember a while back, when Pam and I were asked to perform a song in the wedding of one of Pam's work friends. It was a small Lutheran church and we were both given white cassocks or robes to wear. We were told to sit up front in the chancel where everyone could see us. A few minutes after the service had begun, there was a side door that I had not noticed which, during the service suddenly opened, and a late-arriving wedding guest came in and just sat down next to us in the chancel – up in front of everyone. I had never seen that before. Now the pastor performing the service did not turn to the late-arriving guest and tell her she did not belong up front in that place of honor, but it could have happened.

Another time Pam and I were having dinner with one of my former professors and his wife at Pano's and Paul's – a well-known restaurant in Atlanta. Over dinner he mentioned that whenever he made reservations for dinner, he always asked his wife who was also his secretary, to make dinner reservations for "Dr. Johnson" -- because doctors seemed to get better tables and service. So, when I got my doctorate, I started trying that. I remember there was a restaurant we liked so I tried it. The first few times we got the best tables. But after about the third time, they put us right next to the kitchen. Maybe they wondered if I was a "real" doctor.

But, Jesus says not to assume we should have the highest places of honor, but to humble ourselves and wait to be invited by the host if we should sit elsewhere. All of this was to question whether this focus on the existing social order was really what life was all about. In other words, if we spend our lives focusing on climbing the social ladder, it will not only wear us out – it will not actually result in real life, but an endless struggle to measure up.

There is a second thing Jesus says, and it is directed to the host. Jesus invites him to not only invite the rich or your inner circle to a banquet, so that they might be in your debt to return the favor. Instead, Jesus tells the host to invite those who on the surface, may seem to have little to offer: “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And later, when Jesus tells the parable after those invited guests give excuses for not coming, the host tells his servant to go out and invite new guests. Who are these new guests? “The poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” Those are the very same words Jesus had spoken earlier. (Luke 14:13, 21, NIV) These new guests were thought to be of little use to anyone in that culture, but for Jesus, this is who God invites to the banquet! Now while some of those descriptions, “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,” may not seem to apply to us, (though some certainly do), when it comes to spiritual blindness and our spiritual walk – most of us are probably poor in spirit. But, God’s banquet is not primarily for those who “measure up” on the social ladder of life. God’s banquet is for everyone – especially those of us who don’t have it all together in the eyes of the world. Attending God’s banquet is not about what we have achieved in life; rather, it is a gift of God’s grace that none of us can ever be good enough or rich enough or powerful enough or famous enough to earn. It is simply a gift – an invitation to God’s table.

Notice in the parable what the host’s servant says after being told to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame? After completing the task, he says this: “There is still room.” (Luke 14:22, NIV) Isn’t that good news? There is still room for all of us – if we will choose to come on in without making any excuses. God loves you and God wants you to come on in. Around God’s table you will meet some folks who may not normally move in your circles. Not only do they need to be here along with you, but you need them to be here to learn something about life from them that you might never know otherwise.

I love the word the host in the parable uses to tell the servant what to do in order to get all the people to come. “*Compel* them to come in.” (Luke 14:23, NIV) Don’t just tell them to come in if they want to – it is really up to them. And don’t try to force them to come in – it just doesn’t work that way. To *compel* someone means that you try to convince them and you show them how much you want them to come, and how much they need to come. *Compel them to come in!*

Maybe today we sense that God may be trying to compel us to come on in a little closer. But, we feel the other obligations of life calling to us, like work. Work is good – we all need to support ourselves and our families. But doing the work of God’s kingdom takes it all to another level, and the long-term benefits are incredible! Or, we may find ourselves always drawn to the newest things in life, but God offers us a whole new way of living that has stood the test of time -- and it really works! And finally, while our immediate families are always important, God’s “extended family of faith” is actually a step above those who live in our households. This is the family God calls us to join. God wants us to invite, maybe even compel the members of our own families to come on in and join us. But the final word of God’s grace is this: *there is room for everyone*. So come on in. It won’t be the same without you!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.