

The Gospel for today contains one of our Lord's most instructive parables. It's setting is in the house of a chief Pharisee at mealtime. You and I have been invited to dinner many times and we know that an invitation to dinner is something more than just going somewhere for a meal. There is something more to the extending of the invitation; it is to share the intimacy of the family with the invited guests. It is a privilege and an honor; a time of intimacy and private discussions. Jesus used such settings of a shared meal many times in His teachings. He worked His first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana - at a meal. Jesus shared with His disciples the night before he died what was most important on His mind before he would leave them – at a meal, and the description of it takes up five chapters in John's Gospel! And at that same meal He instituted the Holy Eucharist. After the resurrection, He appeared to His disciples at a meal in the upper room. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus came to know Him in the breaking of the bread – at a meal. Over and over again, there was this setting of a shared meal; it implied the intimacy which God desires in His family.

In this Gospel parable, a certain man has prepared a great feast, and has invited many people to it, but once the feast is ready, many people decline to attend it. What the parable is effectively saying is that it is God who has prepared the feast, the great banquet of salvation that will occur after the final Day of Judgment on earth. The invited guests are the Jews, the chosen people of God, but what do they do? They start to make excuses for not coming. In doing so, they effectively reject the Messiah, the invitation to intimacy with God himself. So God sends His servants out into the town on two different occasions, first to invite and ultimately to compel people to attend His feast. The invitation is given to anybody and everybody; the kingdom of God is not an exclusive club, but open to all who accept Jesus Christ and His message of salvation. God offers this intimate feast to everyone, but many will deliberately neglect or reject it, to their eternal regret.

There are some significant points to take away from this parable. The first and very important point is that God has made provision for the salvation of men's souls. This is the message of Gospel. I like the way J. C. Ryle (a strong evangelist and preacher who was the first Bishop of Liverpool) puts it, "The Gospel contains a full supply of everything that sinners need in order to be saved. Forgiveness of all sin, and peace with God, justification of the person, and sanctification of the heart--grace by the way, and glory in the end--are the gracious provisions which God has prepared for the wants of our souls. There is nothing that sin-laden hearts can wish, or weary consciences require, which is not spread before men in rich abundance in Christ."

Secondly, this great supper, this salvation of souls, is offered to everyone, with no exceptions. The Father is ready to receive all who come to Him by Christ. The Son is ready to cleanse all from their sins who apply to Him by faith. The Spirit is ready to come to all who ask for Him. There is an infinite willingness in God to save man, if man is only willing to be saved. "Him that comes to me, I will in no wise cast out."

Thirdly, many who receive the Gospel invitation will not accept it. We have in this part of the parable a vivid picture of the reception which the Gospel is continually meeting with wherever it is proclaimed. All are invited to come to Christ, but many will not come. It is not just the non-believer who will refuse. It is also the procrastinating, excuse-making people, who are always ready with a reason why Christ cannot be served today. Infidelity and immorality will no doubt account for many who refuse, but decent, self-professed Christians with smooth-spoken excuses will be part of this group as well.

Finally, we are taught that God would have all means used to procure acceptance for His invitation. His patience is inexhaustible, but no excuse will justify anyone from refusing His invitation to come to Christ. If some will not receive the truth, He will have others invited in their stead. He is infinitely willing to

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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save souls. Again as J C Ryle would put it – “We must even not be ashamed to use a *gentle violence*. We must be instant in season, out of season. (2 Tim. 4:2.) We must deal with many an unconverted man, as one who is half-asleep, half out of his mind, and not fully conscious of the state he is in. We must press the Gospel on his notice again and again. We must cry aloud and spare not. We must deal with him as we would with a man about to commit suicide. We must try to snatch him as a brand from the burning. We must say, "I cannot--I will not--I dare not let you go on ruining your own soul." The men of the world may not understand such earnest dealing. They may sneer at all zeal and fervor in religion as fanaticism. But the "man of God," who desires to do the work of God, will heed little what the world says. He will remember the words of our parable. He will "compel men to come in."”

As I present these quotes from J C Ryle, I have to admit to you that I get a little nervous, for I have ventured into that unique Anglican territory of reformed versus unreformed, of Calvin versus Luther, of Protestant versus Catholic, of Evangelism versus Anglo-Catholicism, of “low church” versus “high church”. Anglicanism has long been noted for its ability to tolerate a very wide view of Christianity by navigating the “Via Media” – the middle of the road - between the polar positions of radical reformation and papalist Catholicism. Ryle was an unapologetic Evangelist, and his views of how to pursue the “Great Commission” are probably not the views of many of the people of St. John's, who I think tend to be Anglo-Catholic in their approach. Yet I take the chance of generating some push-back because I think there is need at times to stir the pot a little bit. And yes, priests are supposed to make you uncomfortable at times, as well as comfortable. So I challenge you a little bit by repeating what one speaker put so succinctly during the second general convention of the ACNA in 2014, “we are to be congratulated for our willingness to stand up and sacrifice for the continuance of the Gospel once delivered to the Fathers, but why are we so willing to take such a bold stand in defense of the Gospel, and so timid in proclaiming it?”. Anglican provinces in Africa and Asia are on the front lines of contesting with Islam for souls of people, and in many cases are dying for that privilege as well. Yet there are times when we in the relative ease of our situation here become more concerned about how we are doing things, rather than what we are doing. You've heard the phrase from me before, “majoring in the minors”. We need to guard against coming up with shallow excuses for not more actively pursuing God's wishes and commandments. Complacency is as effective an excuse as focusing on the modern-day equivalents of the Gospel excuses of material assets, or business efforts, or getting married (not going to touch that one!) for declining God's gracious invitation to His heavenly banquet.

So on this Sunday that follows Father's Day, let me leave you with something to ponder a little bit. The Father of us all has prepared a mighty banquet for us, and invited us all to come. Have we truly accepted His invitation, or are we effectively saying, "I cannot come."? What can we be doing as we continue this time of renewal of our little church to encourage both ourselves and others to not let excuses prevent us from joining in the feast, and expanding His kingdom? I know we may be tired and over-stretched, but we cannot give up on Him who refuses to give up on us!

*Amen.*