

You Belong: 4. Inviting
Luke 14:15-24
August 25, 2019
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In 2010, my sister Lisa was the recipient of an extravagant invitation, completely unexpected, unearned and never to be repaid. While on vacation with her family in Colorado, Lisa got sick, so sick that her husband, Derek, took her to the local ER, not once but twice in the same day. And on the second trip, they did a spinal tap and discovered that she had bacteria in her spinal fluid. This is not a good thing! In fact, this is a very bad indicator, usually of spinal meningitis. So he sent her to a larger hospital nearby where they eventually, after a couple of days and many, many tests, discovered that she had Neuro Invasive West Nile Encephalitis, a very rare and very dangerous diagnosis where the bacteria in the fluid surrounding your brain attacks your central nervous system. As it turns out, Lisa had been bitten by a mosquito carrying the West Nile Virus at home in Fresno, California before the trip and now she was very, very sick and she would be very, very sick for a long time. A few days later as they were visiting with the nurse, getting ready to release Lisa, the nurse discovered that their plan was to put Lisa in the car with the family and make the 19 hour car ride home. Upon hearing this, Germaine, the nurse said, "You can't do that." Derek said, "We have no other options." Germaine looked at Lisa and without missing a beat, said, "I'm taking you home with me." Lisa knew she was totally helpless and couldn't care for herself and was not up for a 19 hour car ride. Germaine, a single woman, had never done this before but she recognized a need and was in a position to help and so she did. And she took Lisa to her house, tucked her away in a lower level bedroom to sleep and rest and every 4 hours for the next week, she administered her IV antibiotics and allowed Lisa the time and space she needed to recover. This gave Derek time to get their 3 young children home, return to Colorado and fly, a still very sick, Lisa home a week later. It would take Lisa over a year to fully recover but she would be eternally grateful to Germaine for seeing a need and making an invitation. This is a story about the heart of God.

Today's story, today's parable is also about the heart of God and to understand what prompted Jesus to share it, we need to back up a little bit. Jesus has been invited to dinner on the Sabbath at the home of a Pharisee, a very important religious leader. He may be an honored guest or more likely, this have been a trap to see if they could catch Jesus breaking one of the Jewish laws. Jesus is carefully being watched because he is known to be someone who cares less about the letter of the law and more about the well-being of people. He loved more than he legislated and this made the legalists very uncomfortable.

At this dinner, along with Jesus are other A-List people, the well-known, the expected; think Hollywood or Washington, DC elite. But also present is unlikely person, a sick man in need of healing. Now this was an odd guest to be invited to the home of a Pharisee. He is an odd guest because the religious elite did not hang out with sick, unclean people. But look what Jesus does. After asking the religious leaders a couple of different times if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, and getting no answer, twice, Jesus takes hold of the sick man, heals him and sends him away. He turns and addresses the host and he gives him this advice about his future dinner parties. He says, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Luke 14:12-14.

Jesus is saying that in order to be the people that God created us to be we can't simply cater to those who will repay us or make us look good or increase our popularity in our social circles. When we invite people to eat with us, or hang out with us, we should invite those who cannot care for themselves or have no other place to go, those who have no one to eat lunch with in the lunch room. It is only when we give out of abundance-not looking to be repaid-that we will find a better life, the life we are looking for. Jesus is pushing these guys to imagine a different way of life because Jesus was all about doing things a different way. He hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, thieves and sinners, people on the margins of humanity. He was focused on the unexpected, the uninvited people of this world.

Jesus continues, let me tell you about another host who threw a huge banquet and invited all of the very important people, the VIPs of the day. The first VIP responded to the invitation with, "I have just bought a field and I need to go inspect it. Please excuse me." Really? Who purchases land without seeing it first? Then the second VIP said, "I have just bought 5 oxen and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me." I don't know about you but I'd never buy a tractor or a car without driving it first. And the third VIP replies that he had just gotten married and he wanted to stay home and make my wife happy. Okay, I think this guy had a pretty legitimate excuse. While discussing this with my husband, Jerry, he said, "I get it. He probably had a Honey Do List waiting for him at home."

Excuses. They all had excuses and for one reason or another, decided at the last minute not to go. They couldn't be bothered. They were distracted by more important things; their wealth, their investments and their relationships. This is not simply a story about a man who sent out an invitation to a great party and got stood up by his friends. It's an allegory. The host is understood to be God and the banquet is not an actual banquet, it is the Kingdom of heaven. This is a story about the God of the universe inviting all people to experience the Kingdom of heaven. It's God's invitation to grace for all people.

It's at this point in the story that Luke turns our focus to the host, the man who sent out all of these invitations to this amazing event and every single one of his friends sent their regrets. He was throwing the party of a lifetime but no one wanted to come. Have you ever hosted a big party like this? Jerry and I have had 2 of our children get married and the wedding receptions are parties like this. Our children's weddings were some of the most joyful events of our lives and we wanted to share that joy with everyone. We sent out Save the Dates months ahead of time and then followed up with invitations with RSVPs included so that we could know, down to a tee, how many guests to prepare for. I can't imagine what we would have felt like if every guest had declined to come. We might have felt embarrassed, humiliated, dejected, heart-broken, sad for sure.

Scripture tells us that this host was angry but he didn't sit down and stew, this party was too important not to cancel. He called his humble servant and tells him to go invite all of the town, all of the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, all of the unexpected people, the wrong people, the D-List people. And so his servant goes out, extends the invitation and everybody comes. Then the servant goes back to the master and says, there's still room for more guests. What should we do? So for a third time, he sends his servant out, into the country lanes, behind hedges and dumpsters, underneath freeway overpasses, into the tent cities to compel anyone and everyone to come to the feast. He wants his house to be filled with as many people as possible. He won't stop until everyone is invited.

This third invitation proves God's love for us. It shows us the heart of God. God wants everyone to have a place at the table. God invites anyone and everyone, no matter your gender,

your age, your race, your bank account balance, your social status or who you love. God pushes past the social norms to go to where the downtrodden, marginalized people are. He compels his servant to go to where “these people” are because they are the kind of people who need to be compelled. They are the kind of people who cannot even begin to dream of a world where they are invited to go to a party like this. Go, and compel them to come!

And the painful thing to those listening to Jesus tell this story, the people sitting at the dinner table, is that they realize the only people who weren't at this banquet are people like them. Jesus isn't telling them this story to discourage them or reprimand them but to encourage them. It's a story to encourage us too. We cannot take this extravagant invitation of grace for granted. It is an invitation that requires a response. We're required to respond “yes”. Jesus is urging us to get outside our comfort zones, to get off our seats and to move out into the world like the humble servant to the country lanes and roads and compel people to experience the grace of God, to invite the unexpected guest into the abundant, extravagant kingdom of heaven. But we have to be willing to take risks, to break social protocol, to move outside the boundaries of the town and invite the last in line to join us in celebrating the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How do you respond to those nudges of God? Do you see them as interruptions or invitations?

Tony Campolo, pastor and psychologist, tells a story about a time when he was invited to speak at a conference in Hawaii. Flying from the Midwest or the east coast to Hawaii can mess with your body clock for a few days. Sure enough, on his first day in Honolulu, he found himself wide awake and hungry at 3am. So instead of fighting it, he went out and wandering the streets of Honolulu, found the only place open at that hour, the epitome of a greasy spoon. This place was so small that it only had a counter with stools, no room for tables. After ordering a coffee and a donut, this group of 8-10 prostitutes came into the diner and sat down on all sides of him. Feeling very out of place and awkward, he tried to keep to himself and be invisible. The woman on his left said, “Hey tomorrow is my 39th birthday.”

To which the one on the other side of him replied, “So what do you want me to do about it, Agnes? Throw you a party? Do you think you're someone special or what?” Agnes said, “No, I just wanted to tell you that tomorrow is my birthday. I don't expect anything special. I've never had a party and I don't expect one now. I was just letting you know it's my birthday.” After they left, Tony turned to the cook and said, “Do they come in here every night?” “Yes, 3:30am on the dot.” “Want to help me throw her a birthday party tomorrow night?” The cook thought it was a great idea and even offered to bake Agnes a cake. The next night, Tony showed up early with decorations and found that the place was filled. Word was out about this party and everyone had come. At 3:30am, Agnes and her friends entered the diner to a rousing, “Happy birthday!” Agnes' mouth fell open, her knees buckled, she fell to the floor and tears began to stream down her face. Tony helped her to a stool. When it came time to cut the cake, Agnes asked if they had to cut the cake. The cook said, “It's your cake, you can do what you want with it.” Agnes said, “I've never had a birthday cake before. I just want to take it home and show my mom first. I just live a couple doors down. I'll be right back.” Agnes left and this sudden silence fell over the room. Tony said, being a pastor, the first thing that came to his mind was to say, “Let us pray.” He admits that it was not the usual go-to respond for this crowd but everyone bowed their heads in prayer of blessing for Agnes. When he finished, the cook said, “You didn't tell me you were a preacher. What kind of a church do you belong to? I'd go to a church like that.” In a sudden flash of God-given insight, Tony replied, “The kind of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30am in the morning.”

If we're being honest, wouldn't we all like to join a church like that? That is the kind of church that Jesus came to create. A church that takes risks and does the unexpected. A church that pushes the boundaries of social protocol. A church that goes to the streets and lanes of Plymouth and surrounding communities to meet people where they are and invite them to join us. A church that is filled with people who move out into the world to bring celebration and joy to those who have no joy and nothing to celebrate.

At one time or another, all of us have felt like an outsider looking in. Maybe there are some here today that feel that way today. One of the things that we have learned over the past four months of strategic planning is that 45% of the people in this community identify as Christians but do not have a church home. Friends, we have a glorious opportunity to invite people into this place, into our lives, and into the family so they might know of a God who would stop at nothing to show them his love. We get to partner with that God. God wants his house to be full, and he wants every seat around the table to be filled. We can choose to either be like the Pharisees and sit around the table and argue over who is right and who is wrong and push people out, or we can be like the humble servant, Jesus, and invite everyone to come.

So it got me to wondering, what would it take for Messiah Church to be that church, the most welcoming place in the west metro area? Could we be that? Would we want to be that? Would God want us to be that? I think the answer to all three of those questions is "yes". So I want to offer three suggestions that will move us in that direction:

- Invest: Invest in the people that God has put into your life and ask, what is the next step you can take to develop your relationship?
- Invite: Invite them deeper into your life, not just into a church but into the abundant, joyful life that you have found through this church. Invite those who do not yet know that they are invited to be a part of God's family.
- Have the mind of a host. Be like Kami. Kami intentionally seeks out new people, asks their name and then does all that she can to help them feel comfortable here. It's easy to do, we just have to be prepared to do it.

For Messiah Church to be this kind of church, we must work out - as a church family - what it means to celebrate God's kingdom. It is not enough to say that we ourselves are the people dragged in from the country lanes to enjoy God's party. That may very well be true but in God's kingdom, the party guests are then expected to become the party hosts. This is what our "yes" looks like. In order for us not to take for granted the invitation that we have been given, we are to go and do likewise, and just like Jesus, turn the world on its head, constantly scanning the world around us so that we can be in tune to God's nudging; to meet people where they are, to be open to these holy interruptions and see them as possibilities for proclaiming the kingdom of God. The church is not a place we're called TO its something we're called to GO AND DO.

My hope is that as we leave here today we might do so with courage, with grace, and as a fearless, spirit-led congregation to see everything around us, interruptions and surprises, ripe with God's infinite possibilities.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 25, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Lord, give me the eyes of Jesus to see my neighbors and the strangers I meet each day. Teach me what it means to love the stranger as much as I love myself. Forgive me for my selfishness, for my silence, for not caring enough for the strangers who come to my

neighborhood and community. Teach me to love and care for the stranger the way you do. Amen.

Monday, August 26

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Observation: As Israel’s story began, God promised Abraham, “All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you” (Genesis 12:3). The prophet Isaiah said when God was victorious, he would prepare “a rich feast”—that was how rulers marked victories. The great food and drink was just a symbolic appetizer. God promised to “swallow up death forever,” and “wipe tears from every face.” And God’s banquet would be for “all peoples,” “all nations,” “the whole earth.”

Application: By Jesus’ day, Israel’s religious leaders loved the image of God’s great banquet. Many were sure they would be the honored guests. They’d missed a crucial part of the vision. “In one of many expansive visions in Isaiah, God is imagined preparing a banquet not just for the elders on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24), nor even for Judah, but for all the nations.” What tempts you to limit your vision of God’s “banquet” to just your own church, nation or ethnic group? How does your heart respond to God’s expansive vision?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the day your victory over death and evil becomes complete will be the ultimate “red letter” day. Keep reminding me that, through your death and resurrection, you already assured that victory. Amen.

Tuesday, August 27

Scripture: Matthew 21:45—22:6

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.

Observation: Just before this passage, on the Monday before his crucifixion, Jesus told a story about tenant farmers who killed the vineyard owner’s son (Matthew 21:33-44). In this reading, he switched the image to a wedding party—but the underlying message was the same. Here invited guests were not just refusing to attend a feast, but abusing and killing the servants sent to tell them the party was ready to start.

Application: The chief priests and the Pharisees had made up their minds about Jesus. But Matthew said, “They feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.” They’d reached a conclusion we Christians do not share—but they were also acting on it in a way shaped not by principle, but by a desire to maintain a public image at odds with the facts. Is there any area of life where you “fear the crowds” too much to act authentically?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I’d never grab your servants, abuse and kill them. Would I? Free me from the urge to wound even people I disagree with through words or actions that fall short of your honesty and compassion. Amen.

Wednesday, August 28

Scripture: Matthew 22:7-14

The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’”

So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Observation: The king in this story seems harsh to us. In this story, though, the king was a “prop”—he acted as the hearers expected a king to act. Jesus’ lesson was not about God, but about the invited guests, snubbing the feast or showing disrespect to the host. Some scholars suggest that the host would have provided special garments; others simply note that coming to a wedding banquet in soiled clothing would insult the host. The parable asked the hearers (who were plotting to kill Jesus): how are you responding to God’s invitation?

Application: Jesus wasn’t teaching that we should wear tuxes to weddings. The ‘wedding clothes’ represent a fruitful life lived in obedience to God’s will. For the image, see Revelation 19:7-8. The metaphor is made possible by the significance of clothing in the ancient world, in which one’s clothing exhibited one’s character (thus, e.g., ‘dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ’ [Romans 13:14]; or ‘All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’ [Galatians 3:27].” As you respond to God’s invitation to be part of the great kingdom feast, how “well-dressed” are you? Are there any areas of life where you feel like showing up in the spiritual equivalent of ragged shorts and flip flops?

Prayer: Lord God, I want to honor your gift of forgiveness and salvation by “dressing” myself with the Lord Jesus Christ. Guide me in building a life that exhibits my gratitude and respect for you. Amen.

Thursday, August 29

Scripture: Luke 14:7-14

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to

take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Observation: Jesus wasn't urging sneaky manipulation in this passage, a false "Aw shucks" modesty. He was calling us to set aside our obsession with rank and status and be at peace with who we are. Consistent with his entire life and teaching, he urged people to avoid selfishly pushing for their own recognition and advantage, to leave room for honoring others.

Application: Jesus' point was bigger than party etiquette. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, "Within Luke's lifetime thousands of non-Jews had become Christians.... Many Jewish Christians...found this difficult, if not impossible, to approve or understand. They were so eager to maintain their own places at the top table that they could not grasp God's great design to stand the world on its head. Pride...is the great cloud which blots out the sun of God's generosity." In what ways can you welcome into God's family people to whom you might feel superior?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have honored me by loving, redeeming and accepting me. Help me keep growing in my ability to extend that same kind of generosity to others. Amen.

Friday, August 30

Scripture: Luke 14:15-20

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.'

Observation: Jesus' hearers would readily see these excuses as flimsy when they heard them. "One normally would inspect a field before buying it.... One normally tested oxen before buying them.... Weddings were planned far in advance, so the new husband knew about the conflict before he agreed to come. Each of the excuses is so weak that it would insult the host; together, it is clear that the excuses constitute deliberate dishonor."

Application: Just before this story, Luke told about Jesus healing a man with a painful physical ailment (Luke 14:1-6) on the Sabbath. Twice in that story, Jesus challenged the leaders who disapproved of his healing. Both times, Luke said, "They said nothing...they had no response." How did religious people so lock themselves into their hatred of Jesus that they couldn't even explain their thinking? What lessons can you learn from observing them sitting there in tight-lipped silence?

Prayer: God, when I fall short of your ideal (and I do), help me not to hide behind flimsy excuses. Teach me to trust your love enough to honestly face the things that come between me and the life you offer me. Amen.

Saturday, August 31

Scripture: Luke 14:21-24

“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.’”

Observation: Writer and preacher Brennan Manning wrote, “After reading the entire Gospel of Luke for the first time, a post-Valley girl said: ‘Wow! Like Jesus has this totally intense thing for ragamuffins.’” Jesus lived among many religious people who recoiled at the idea of sharing God’s kingdom with “sinners” (a term they defined roughly as “not as good as I am”). He told some of them this story. The ending was shocking: against all established social protocol, the king invited even the town’s street people to come enjoy the royal banquet.

Application: This parable isn’t about “those poor people” who aren’t like us. We all come to God’s “banquet” as people who are spiritually “poor, crippled, blind and lame”—people who need God’s grace. So the story poses two very personal questions. First, can you see the degree to which you are a ragamuffin before God, one more person who desperately and gratefully needs God’s grace and mercy? Second, are you open to inviting and welcoming into God’s kingdom the ragamuffins of all kinds who live around you, even if at first you might feel a bit uncomfortable in their company? What has helped you learn to bless others with humble gratitude, not as a superior lowering yourself to help an inferior?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you loved ragamuffin me enough to die for me, enough to promise to be with me every day. I ask you to guide me in the process of laying aside the rags of my pride, to serve you and others every day in love and gratitude. Amen.