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 January 25, 2015

You Invited Who?
 Luke 14:15-24

Someone described Washington D.C. as a series of concentric circles, where people attend endless dinners and cocktail parties, trying to maneuver their way closer and closer to centers of power. The top prize, then, is to score tickets to the innermost circle, a black-tie White House dinner. So it's no surprise that in 2009, Tariq and Michaela Salahi, aspiring reality TV stars, crash a White House dinner. They're caught when Michaela, a former Redskins cheerleader, posts pictures on Facebook, calling the evening, "the dream of a lifetime."

We do celebrate life's highpoints – a birthday, an engagement, a wedding, Thanksgiving, an anniversary – with festive dinners. It's great fun to bring people together. Close friends or ours were invited to a dinner catered by a prominent Manhattan chef, who is appalled by the menu: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole with a French onion soup topping, a wedge of lettuce with 1000 island dressing, and a mountainous brownie with vanilla ice cream. The dinner's invitees have never met, but they soon figure out what they have in common. They're all Midwesterners, and over the chef's dead body, they love every bite.

Eating together is "sacramental" and sacred. Breaking bread, sharing a glass of wine, and having unhurried conversations build friendship, intimacy and love. It's said that the family that prays together stays together; it's equally true that the family that eats together stays together. Biblical scholar Ken Bailey was invited to a friend's home deep in rural Iran, where many villagers had never seen an American. Very deliberately his host sets up the table outside, in plain sight of everyone. And Bailey thinks immediately of Psalm 23, "*He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*"

Dinners are sacred, and so the prophet Isaiah pictures salvation as a great banquet with the finest fare and the choicest wine, "*The God of hosts will make for all people on this mountain, a fat banquet with the choicest wine. God will swallow up the veil spread over all nations, the veil of death. God will wipe away tears from all faces, the reproach of His people, and will take away our sin. Lo, this is our God; we wait for Him that He may save us.*"

God invites everyone on earth, Jew and Gentile alike, to this banquet, to this most joyous of feasts for here sin, evil and death are vanquished. Instead of having to bring gifts for the host, as is customary, God offers the banquet out of sheer grace, with no strings attached. And for many who live at the subsistence level, in utter poverty, for the first time, they will taste the food and drink of kings! Ancient Jews anticipate this feast at every meal, including the feast in our text:

Luke 14:15-24

Jesus spends a lot of time at parties. He's anything but a killjoy. In fact, He's accused of being a wine-gulper and a glutton. The two best parties that Mary Ann and I ever attended were the wedding receptions for our sons Erik and Mark, when they marry Alison and Chrissy. What sheer unadulterated joy!

And since the church is the bride of Christ, hopefully we have the sheer joy of being loved, chosen and forgiven by the Creator of the universe, of being supported by our brothers and sisters in Christ, of having the privilege of prayer, the guidance of God's word, and the promise that our eternal futures are utterly secure! But I find that if I forget to give thanks and to count my blessings; if my prayers are about getting, rather than on connecting with our Lord; if I don't meditate on the love and grace of God, I can lose this pervasive sense of joy. One of the ways we love God is to let God love us, and in that there is joy!

This Sabbath day party that Jesus attends is at the home of a prominent Pharisee. As the other Pharisees watch closely, in limps a man with congestive heart failure. Jesus asks, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Suddenly there's a stony silence. Jesus heals the man and says, "You rescue your child or an ox if they fall into a well on the Sabbath, why wouldn't you help someone imprisoned by sickness?" There is no excuse for failing to help a fellow human being in need!

Then Jesus notices how the guests scramble for places of honor. Ashamed at their arrogance, Jesus gives practical advice, "If you grab a seat of honor, and a big-shot comes, you'll be mighty embarrassed when the host tells you to move to a lower place. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted, because God can only use us if we're open and teachable and willing to admit that we don't have it all together.

And then Jesus confronts the host, "When you give a banquet don't invite your rich friends to score brownie points, instead invite the poor, the lame, and the blind." Ouch! I've told you of Isaiah's inclusive invitation to the great Messianic banquet, how all people, Jew and Gentile alike, will be invited. But in the 600 years since Isaiah writes, a dramatic change in thinking has occurred.

When the Jews return from exile in Babylon about 520 B.C., Samaritans, from north of Jerusalem, offer to help them rebuild. The returning Jews call the Samaritans accursed "half-breeds," and refuse their help, creating division and even hatred. So, before Jesus, there is no such thing as a "good" Samaritan.

Then about 100 B.C. a book called I Enoch is written. The author of I Enoch pictures the Messiah assembling, by rank, the wise, the intelligent and the perfect. So now the once inclusive Kingdom has attained a pecking order. And I Enoch pictures an angel of death slaying all the Gentiles, and keeping from the banquet anyone who is lame or blind or blemished. Shades of Isis!

And the Qumran community, who write the Dead Sea Scrolls, goes a step further. They prohibit from the banquet anyone deemed “unrighteous,” which can mean almost anything. So here comes Jesus doing the unthinkable, restoring Isaiah’s vision. He throws banquets and invites lepers, tax-collectors, hated Roman collaborators, prostitutes and other sinners. He invites to the table, to the Kingdom of God, the worst of the worst. Doesn’t He respect for the law? Doesn’t He understand the danger of contamination? Doesn’t He affirm those of us who try so hard to be righteous!

We can feel the growing tension at this dinner table, like when Uncle Harvey’s had a few too many and starts badmouthing Mildred for her divorce! We’ve all heard distasteful conversations where we want to hide under the table. So a table guest tries to smooth things over, “Blessed are they who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God,” meaning “blessed are the wise, the intelligent and the super-religious.” So, in response, Jesus tells this parable.

Once a very prominent man throws a great banquet. In ancient oriental custom, the day before, he secures RSVPs from all the guests. The host spares no expense and when everything is ready, he sends his servant to say, “It’s time.” But the first guest says, “Oh, I can’t come. I’ve just bought a field and must go see it.” What? No one buys a field in the ancient world without months of study – how is the soil? Is it rocky? Does it contain clay? Where are the water supplies? How does it drain? Does it face the sun? If it has fruit trees, what is the yield? This is like me telling Mary Ann, “Dear, I’ve just spent half a million dollars on a new house, and I’m going over to check it out.” The excuse is ludicrous!

The servant visits the second guest, and he says, “Oh, I can’t come. I’ve just bought five yoke of oxen – FIVE YOKE OF OXEN! – and I must go try them out.” No one buys five yoke of oxen, which was one of the most expensive investments of that day. That’s like buying 5 Porsches today at the same time. (For those interested, a 2015 Porsche 911 starts at \$83,721).

And you spent days seeing if the oxen were compatible, if they have equal strength, if they’re healthy, if they’ll even wear a yoke.” You tested them by spending a few hours having them plow a field. No one buys a pair of oxen, sight-unseen. The excuse is ludicrous!

Then the servant visits the third guest, who crudely says, “My wife and I are fooling around.” We can’t come, and this guest doesn’t even apologize. Suddenly it’s clear. There’s collusion here. The guests are trying to shut down the banquet. It’s like arranging an expensive dinner party at your house. People arrive and enjoy drinks. Then when dinner is to be served, they all get up and leave. One says, “I going to watch the game between Tulsa and SW Missouri State.” Another says, “I’ve got to weed the garden,” and a third says, “I’ve got to drop my shirts off at the dry cleaners,” and they all walk out.

The meaning, of course, is clear. The ancient Jews await the Messiah and the Messianic banquet. Then Jesus, the Messiah, arrives, and He welcomes, in the words and spirit of the prophet Isaiah, everyone to the banquet. But many refuse to come. "I'm not going to eat with a Samaritan; I'm not going to sit beside a prostitute; I don't associate with riff-raff." And they offer their excuses.

On one level, we all make excuses. The ten most common New Year's resolutions are: 1) I will lose weight and get fit; 2) I will quit smoking; 3) I will begin to read and study; 4) I will eat healthier; 5) I will get out of debt and save money; 6) I will spend more time with my family; 7) I will be less stressed; 8) I will volunteer more; 9) I will travel to a new place, and 10) I will drink less. But it takes 21 days to establish a habit, and experts warn of trying to do too much too soon. It's best to set one or two goals, to break the goal down into manageable steps, and to keep a journal or have an accountability partner to monitor progress.

On a deeper level, when do we say, "no" to God? Discernment of God's will begins with prayer and awareness. We slow down. We listen. We watch. We ask questions, instead of flying on autopilot. As we're faithful in one decision, God will show us another decision to be made. One guest said no because of a business deal; another said no because of greed, wanting five yoke of oxen, the last guest said no because of passion. How do we keep our work, materialism and passions under God's guidance?

The question is often asked, "*Why would a loving God send someone to hell?*" But God doesn't send anyone to hell. A gracious invitation is given. Even when the host of the banquet is publically humiliated, he doesn't respond with anger, as he could. He responds with grace, looking more and more widely for anyone who will come in. In Revelation, the gates of heaven are always open. But we make choices. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "We either say to God, 'Thy will be done,' or God says to us, 'Thy will be done.'"

But Jesus' challenge is to throw the doors of the banquet hall open as widely as possible. That's why we Presbyterians have open communion. We invite any believer of any denomination to come to the feast. I've always been moved by these words of theologian Marcus Barth, "*Whoever sits at table with Jesus must accept Christ's other guests. Jesus has a strange entourage – the publicans and sinners, the poor, the bums from the streets, prostitutes and cowardly and treacherous disciples like Peter and Judas. Whoever feels too good or noble to be in that company can't sit at our Lord's table. Unless we receive the bums, we can't receive Jesus.*"

Chuck and I are preaching a series of sermons on being not just a welcoming church, but on being an inviting church, where we take the initiative to reach out to our neighbors and friends. We do a pretty good job of welcoming a guest once they cross our threshold, but not such a good job of praying for, and inviting a

guest to be a part of our fellowship. And the invitation is really quite simple. There's a party going on, and we'd love to have you join us! Thanks be to God. Amen.