

“Life of the Party”

First in a Series in the Gospel of Luke

Go to the country roads, whoever you find...I want my house full.

Luke 14:23

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Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - Help us O God to realize in your presence with all your people is where the life of the party is found and we are all invited to be a part of your kingdom movement. Amen.

Message -

Our lives are full of them. They mold and shape who we are. Even before we are born we are a part of them. Some have the power to define us. Some can nearly destroy us. Some inspire us to new heights. Some are loud, rambunctious and full of chaos, crisis, and conflict, while others are quiet, tender and more subtle and calm. Some of them we can control while others are an animal all their own.

What is we are full of? Stories. The story of who we are. The story of how we were born. Stories of how we came to be who and what we are. The story of how our family came to be. The story of our first heartbreak, first or last job, our first apartment or house. The story of surviving adolescence - of raising an adolescent; of love and loss. The story of meeting our future spouse, getting lost on vacation, throwing up on that one roller coaster, and so many more. Stories that remind us of what matters most and to make the most of what matters. Stories that become the threads that make up, as the commercial says, “the fabric of our lives.”

Stories help us understand and give us context and vocabulary to make meaning out of what we experience in life. That is why stories are so

powerful and captivate our attention. Because they help us make sense out of all kinds of emotions, situations, and circumstances. How we relate, connect and find ourselves in a story helps explain how and why we feel what we feel, do what we do, and react the way we react. For this reason, stories are one of if not the most powerful way of learning, connecting, and understanding.

Jesus knew this and used the power of story to preach, teach, challenge, encourage, and transform the lives of all those who would have ears to hear.

Over the next few weeks we invite you to hear the stories of Jesus as told in the gospel of Luke. These parables reveal how Jesus was able to connect with people of all ages and stages, status and rank, and power and poverty. They show us how Jesus challenged those who thought they knew what they knew, convicted those who considered themselves insiders, and gave hope to those considered less than, marginalized, and outcast. It is our prayer that through these stories of Jesus we will be reminded of who Jesus is, why he walked among us, and how we are to live by his example. AND maybe even learn something new along the way.

We begin with the parable or story of a dinner party found in Luke 14. Here Jesus is in the midst of alternating direct teaching and storytelling. He often tells a story then follows with a real example or vice versa. We see this in chapter 13 with the parable of the barren fig tree, followed by Jesus healing a crippled woman. Then telling the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast, followed by the teaching “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (vs30). Chapter 14 begins with a healing and then a two part - two feast parable about humility and hospitality.

Part one of ch. 14 speaks of guests trying to sit in a place of honor at a wedding feast and Jesus tells them there is more honor and blessing when you can get over your pride and desire to be seen as someone more

important than others and instead be content to put others before yourself. Be humble.

Part two is known as the great banquet and addresses the question what kind of people Jesus will use to further his message and carry out his mission. It is the more elaborate version of the dinner party found in chapter 5, when Jesus calls Levi to be a disciple.

Hear then the story of the Great Banquet: Luke 14:15-24

If the dinner party in chapter five is a movie trailer, this section of chapter 14 is the full blown cinematography marvel! Ch. 5 was simply a snapshot, ch. 14 gives the full length feature film.

The characters in this blockbuster film:

1. Someone / Master = God
2. Originally invited guest = Jews / insiders / those who knew the sacred scriptures and stories and had been waiting for God to return and set them once again free.
3. Poor, lame, blind, etc. = gentiles / outsiders / foreigners / marginalized. Those who had heard of this God, the One who would come offering healing, hope and security in their insecure world.
4. Servants = those following the instructions to find and bring in all people willing to accept the invitation.

The setting of this great drama, is in the presence of God. Some argue this text is about eternal life / heaven. Others say it is right now, today - those moments when we recognize God breaking into our midst. Why can't it be both?

This is a fascinating text because in part one, the scene is a wedding party and in Jesus' day that was the kind of occasion people would vie for a place of honor. It was their chance to be seen by the who's who of the day.

And so we find ourselves either as the one throwing the party or the one attending the party. If we are the host of the party, we are challenged to seek out and recognize those who come with humility and graciousness and give them a place of honor rather than the ones who come with hidden agendas and are only there to rub elbows with the elite. If we are the guest attending the party we are challenged to set aside our desire for personal gain and recognition of our status and put other guests before ourselves. The lesson being that honor comes through humility and blessing through service.

In part two the party is much bigger and wide reaching and it is God sending out the invitation. It is an invitation to participate in the very kingdom of God. This is the moment the Jewish people had been waiting for - the moment God says to them, "I am here, you waiting is over, come and join me, your God, and feast in the long awaited kingdom of God."

You see, the Jews had a preconceived notion of what would happen when God broke into history like the days of Abraham, Noah, Moses and the great prophets. They imagined the "golden days of the new age arrived" (Barclay 192), and which was to include a great messianic banquet and on that day God would give a great feast to his own people and of course in their mind it would be them, the Jews only. They never would have dreamed that gentiles and sinners would find a place at the feast of God.

Well they got the feast part right anyway.

Level one of this parable is pretty clear. Jesus had been going around Galilee summoning people to God's great supper. Again this is the moment Israel / the Jewish people had been waiting for. But most of them refuse, giving all kinds of reasons / excuses as to why they can't participate. But some people have been delighted to be included: the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled.

Level two is about who else is invited. Again the expected guests are the Jews, waiting and waiting for the kingdom, only to find, when it arrived, that they had more pressing things to occupy them. The servants then, those already following the instructions of the master, go out and get all kinds of people to join the party - to join the movement which Jesus is leading; not just Gentiles, but people with every kind of moral and immoral background, people quite different from them culturally, socially, ethnically and ethically.

The third level of meaning however, contains I believe the heart and power of the story. It goes back to the beginning, returning to the challenge which Jesus gave in verses 12-14. If you haven't figured it out yet, this story is not about food! It is a metaphor of what Jesus was and is inviting us to participate in. The party to which the original guests were invited was Jesus' kingdom movement, the living breathing Kingdom of God. It is his remarkable welcome to all people. It is not about food and festivities. It is not about rules and long standing boundaries. It is not about being at the right table with the right people at the right time or on the right side of the issue.

The great banquet is about a kingdom movement that God, through Jesus was and is leading and calling all people to be a part of. The point of such an elaborate story, I believe, is to describe, illustrate and make tangible what Jesus was about; what God was offering to all people, and the idea that If people wanted to be included in Jesus' movement, this is the sort of thing they were joining - a movement in which ALL are welcome to feast on the goodness, mercy, and grace of God through Jesus.

There are a lot of people in churches, denominations and religious organizations struggling to understand who is invited and who is not to the kingdom table of Jesus. There are a lot of good people on both sides of multiple issues being challenged, ridiculed, ostracized, targeted, pitted

against each other, and emotionally torn up over who gets to participate in the kingdom banquet / kingdom movement that Jesus has set in motion and who does not.

Nowhere in this parable does Jesus say to weed out the guest list; prioritize by gender, financial status, ethnicity, and educational level; measure their value by what they drive, where they live, and who they know; weight their worth by who they love, what party lines they vote, or where they work, if they work.

Jesus tells this story to help us understand that if we want to follow Jesus - if we want to be the believer and church Jesus calls us to be - if we accept his invitation to this great banquet, this kingdom movement, than we better be prepared to dine, to serve, live and learn alongside people who are different than what we expect. We better recognize God is a God of surprises and the unexpected.

What gives this banquet life are the lives of all those who come - those who respond and have the courage to say, "we may not agree, we may not fully understand, we may have different ideas and explanations BUT Jesus is at the center of all that we are.

So what would it mean church, to celebrate God's kingdom so that the people at the bottom of the pile, at the end of the line, or on the other side of the wall, would find it to be a story of good news and NOT a harsh word of judgement or divisive criticism? A story of loving our neighbor and not hating or destroying them before ever knowing them?

Can such a story be told? Will our lives be the ones to tell it? Will our story here at Grace church be the kind of banquet giving kingdom moving story that Jesus wants us to tell?

With all my heart, I pray it so. Amen.