

## Jesus' Stories That Sneak Up On Us: Come To Party

Luke 14: 12-23.

Our tradition of the Season of Grace began here 20 or so years ago. We had Advent and Lent which revolved around the birth and death of Jesus. But we wanted to make use of the summer Sundays to serve specific needs of the church and to emphasize especially the life and teachings of Jesus, the Jesus between the words of the creeds which jumped from “born of the Virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” The Jesus of the “dash”, so to speak, between the date of birth and the date of death.

So this summer we are taking a parable of Jesus each Sunday so we might hear them all over again, ponder them in a new way for our lives. Our Davis Lecturer this July 14 is the brilliant Jewish New Testament Professor , Amy Jill Levine. Her book on the parables, *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, begins with the chapter, “How We Domesticate Jesus’ Provocative Stories.” We usually glide through the stories we’ve heard many times and attach a meaning that bores us to death. She says we would be better off thinking less about what

they “mean” and more about what they can “do”: “provoke, challenge and inspire.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus believed that parables were the best way to teach about the kingdom of God. “Parable” means “to throw alongside.” Jesus threw these stories alongside our everyday lives to help us imagine what it might be like to enter the kingdom of God. Someone has said, “the shortest distance between two people is a story.” Jesus believed that the shortest distance between us and the kingdom of God was a story.

## I

So today we launch our Sundays with the parables with Luke’s version of Jesus’ story of the Great Feast. And he launches into it with some provocative words:

When you give a dinner party or a banquet, do not invite your friends, or your family or your rich neighbors, so they can also invite you in return.... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...”

A man at the table piously said, “Blessed are they who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Or, “Won’t it be great in the world to come?” And Jesus told a story about the great feast of the kingdom of God which is meant for THIS world.

Dinner parties reflect our social status, our class values. In Miss Manners' book, *Miss Manners Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*, she has a section on "The Guest List". Here is her advice:

*You may have heard of "A" lists and "B" lists. All experienced hosts classify their friends this way, but only the clumsy one allows their guests to know, looking around a room, which they are on.*

*The "A" list consists of ..."sparklies". These are the people, who through their private status or through their talented efforts can "make a party."*

*The "B" list consists of solid citizens with a strong sense of duty. The duty is to listen to the sparklies and to be able to carry on a reasonable good conversation.*

*Then there is the "C" list, which, like poverty, one is always trying to eliminate but can't. These are the social obligations—incurred through sloppy acceptance of their hospitality, ancient friendships from which interest has disappeared, or the pleas of "A" or "B" listed friends.*

She concludes:

*In the well-planned dinner party for ten, there should be: two sparklies from different fields, four solid listeners and contributors from assorted professions, one charity case, and one mystery guest whose classification will not be clear until after being auditioned at the dinner.”*

(That’s page 480, for you who wish to consult your own copy.)

But Jesus says to us and to the Miss Manners of the world, when you have a party invite “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind”.

## II

Then he told them a story. A big wig in town threw a lavish dinner party. All the VIPs were invited. Miss Manners would have approved the guest list. Then he sent his servants out to make the rounds and say, “Come, everything is ready!” But they all, shockingly, began to make excuses. Thanks but no thanks.

One had just bought a piece of land and had to go see it.” Regrets.” Another had just bought five yoke of oxen. “I must go try them out.” “Regrets”. A third had just gotten married. Honeymoon. So sorry.

There was an everydayness about the excuses. Not bad things, regular things. So the parable may be asking us: When does my everydayness distract me from what God is doing and wants me to join, maybe even today? When does our busyness blind us to the presence of God, God's dream for me and for the world? When does our compulsive activity push down our spiritual emptiness and our need for God? "Sorry, I've got too much on my plate." Regrets.

### III

What does the host of the party do? He doesn't waste time in recriminations, whatever the embarrassment he may have felt. He called his servants, "Go quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in (yes) the poor, the maimed the lame and the blind." His servant came back and said, "Sir, I've done what you commanded, and there are still empty seats!" And the host said, "Then go back out to the highways and hedges, to the city streets and back alleys, to the all-night Waffle Houses, to those living under bridges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled!" Not just invite, compel! God wants the house filled!

What if a church put out an invitation to the city:

"Dear poor, maimed, lame and blind, we have just the church for you! Come as you are, not as you're not. And there's dinner every Sunday. Come

join us. We can't be the church without you!" That might strike some interest, startle people enough to show up.

Who might show up? We are the church of the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind.

We all are poor in some way. The needy are welcome here. Needy like us.

And maimed, and lame and blind. Some of us in ways others may not see. A poet named Christian Wiman tells of his family adopting a dog who became a beloved part of the family. But one week their dog began to lose his health. Week by week he grew worse. Worried, they took him to the vet, who could not figure out what was wrong—until he took X rays and discovered a bullet lodged deep in his body. Only now was it taking its toll. Some terrible person in the past had shot their dog, and he has carried the bullet in his body. There are a lot of people carrying a bullet lodged deep in their bodies.

And lame, the limp that may not be visible to others. In Wendell Berry's story, "Remembering", a young farmer, Andy Catlett, has lost his right hand in a farming accident. This is how Berry describes his plight:

“His right hand had been the one with which he reached out to the world and attached himself to it. When he lost his hand he lost his hold.... All the world became to him a steep slope, and he was a man descending, staggering and falling, unable to reach out to a tree trunk or branch or root to catch and hold on.”<sup>2</sup>

I know no better description of loss, of grief. The sorrowing are welcome here too.

And blind? There are many ways to be blind. Physical, spiritual, moral, emotional. Jesus comes to us whatever our blindness. Most times, I think, we are blind to our own blindnesses. Jesus helps us here.

All are invited to God’s feast, and God wants the house filled! There’s an early American folk hymn that I love. I think it’s like this parable.

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
Jesus ready stands to save you,  
Full of pity, love and power.

Let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness he requireth

Is to feel your need of him.

Come, ye, weary, heavy laden,  
Lost and ruined by the Fall;  
If you tarry til you're better,  
You will never come at all.

I will arise and go to Jesus,  
He will embrace me in his arms;  
In the arms of my dear Savior,  
Oh, there are ten thousand charms.

So here's the invitation: Come to the Party of Grace. There are those who've never heard of the Party. There are some who don't think there can be such a thing. Others have heard of it, but don't think they are invited. Then there are those who've received the invitation and come, but when they get there don't really believe they belong there. There's been some mixup. "If they knew who I really am, I wouldn't be here".

But there are those, let's call them the blessed, who've gotten the invitation and come, and when they get there they feel like they finally



belong. There's been no mistake. That's what this "grace" thing is all about. I hope there are days you feel this way, maybe even today.

#### IV

Last turn of the story. When Jesus told this parable it was about the kingdom of God, which means it was more than about *church*, it was about the whole world and what God wants it to be for everyone, what God wants it to be like *now*, "on earth as it is in heaven." So now we are the host's servants, hitting the streets, telling people about the feast. And God is enlisting us to more than "packing a pew", as we used to put it, but to make this whole world, or our little corner of it, more like that great feast where all are welcome, all are fed. Where the band is playing, and no one is ashamed.

I see you doing this every week. Perhaps, then, the most important message of this parable for you today is this: "Don't forget, there's a place set for you at the table too. Jesus is pulling out the chair for you. The party of grace is for you too!"

I close with a poem by a British poet and parson, R.S. Thomas, minister of small, weather-beaten churches all his life and one of the great

modern poets. It's called "The Kingdom", and it sounds a lot like this parable of Jesus and his other parables of the kingdom.

It's a long way off, but inside it  
 there are quite different things going on:  
 Festivals at which the poor man  
 Is king and the consumptive is  
 Healed; mirrors at which the blind look  
 At themselves and love looks at them  
 Back; and industry is for mending  
 The bent bones and minds fractured  
 By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
 There takes no time and admission  
 Is free, if you will purge yourself  
 Of desire , and present yourself with  
 Your need only and the simple offering  
 Of your faith, green as a leaf.<sup>3</sup>

I can almost hear at a distance the band beginning to play. There's some Tommy Dorsey big band music, and the Beatles, some Motown, Beach Boys, and Bruce Springsteen too. They are playing for you. For us, for all.

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1. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (N.Y.: Harper Collins, 2014), 4,297.
  2. Wendell Berry, “Remembering”, *Three Short Novels* (Washington, D.C., Counterpoint, 2002), 142.
  3. R.S. Thomas, “The Kingdom”, *Later Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 35.