

The Great Feast

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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Jesus ate and drank with all the wrong people. It was a social and religious scandal. For Jesus it was a sign of the kingdom of God, and what I call “gospel hospitality.” Here is how he described it:

When you throw a dinner party don’t invite your friends, family and rich neighbors who can repay you in-kind. Instead, when you have a party invite the *poor*, the *maimed*, the *lame*, the *blind*.

Have any of you read *Miss Manner’s Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*? She has a section entitled “The Guest List.” Here is what she says:

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, from 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, like the ideal middle class, should consist of solid citizens with a strong sense of duty. The duty is to listen to sparklies and to be able carry on a reasonable amount of 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.

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 want to consult your own copy.)

But Jesus says, when you have a party invite the *poor*, the *maimed*, the *lame*, the *blind*.

I

Then Jesus told a parable. A big wig in town threw a lavish dinner party. All the V.I.P’s were invited. Miss Manners would have approved the list. Then he sent his servant 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. “Regrets.”

None of the excuses were bad excuses. Some were good. If I had gotten an invitation to a great party the week after my wedding with Sue last June, I would have said, “I’d love to, but....” Jesus doesn’t make a big deal about the excuses in the story. They are first gear getting us to second gear. So I won’t either.

Let me just say, the “everydayness” of our lives can blind us to those moments that make life worth living.

II

What was the host now to do? An empty banquet hall! He’s upset, and probably not a little embarrassed. He sends his servant out with the words, “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes and bring in anyone you can find, the *poor*, the *maimed*, the *lame*, the *blind*.”

Before our minds start thinking about who the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind around us might be, let us think about *ourselves*. How many ways are there to be poor, maimed, lame, blind? We may have graduated from poverty, but

we can, as Fosdick's great hymn put it, be "rich in things and poor in soul." And *maimed*? Most of us carry our woundedness on the inside. Broken hearts, abuse, trauma, rejection, failure. But they impact our lives every day. And *lame*? What in life has crippled you? I've got more Achilles' heels than heels. And *blind*? We are so blind to so many things. One of the biblical images of conversion is "enlightenment." The opening of eyes, especially as Paul put it, "the eyes of the heart."

Have you ever shown up at a gathering wondering if you really belong? Or decide not to go, because you were afraid you didn't belong?

Some of us live with what psychologists call "the imposter syndrome." We say, if people *really* knew who I was, or all I had done, they wouldn't accept me, wouldn't want me here. I may be a success on the outside, but I feel like a failure on the inside. Tommy Tomlinson, one of the best writers the *Charlotte Observer* ever produced has just written a powerful memoir about his life long struggle with obesity. He says he's had this FM radio station going on in his mind all his life. It's called USUCK-FM. There's the constant messaging of "You are worthless; you are weak. Why can't you..." On and on. It never stops.

Or maybe you think you've messed things up too bad, that you can't really be forgiven, by God or anyone else. There's an old American folk hymn I love. It spells "grace" to me.

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 till you're better

You will never come at all.

All of which is to say, the party is for you too. And it's all grace.

III

Frederick Buechner wrote a set of novels based on the key character, Leo Bebb. He is an evangelist with enough of a shady past to know the meaning of grace. He runs a ministry in Armadillo Florida named, the *Church of Holy Love*. You could take courses on-line, and if you sent him some money, he would ordain you!

One day he decided to move *Holy Love* from Florida, to Princeton, New Jersey, where he hoped to evangelize Princeton University and all its young people who were part of the "Pepsi Generation", as the ads put it back then. A more unlikely crusade you could hardly imagine.

His first Thanksgiving he decided to throw a great Thanksgiving meal for the students and faculty. He sent out flyers all over campus and talked a wealthy woman into the use of her home to prepare a meal for two hundred.

When the day came all was ready, the turkey and all the amenities, tables with table cloths and flowers, a four piece band, everything. By one o'clock however only about a dozen students had shown up. By two o'clock maybe

twenty. Bebb stood up and addressed the group. He told them this story in Luke about the man who had thrown a great feast and nobody had shown up, and how he sent his servant out into the streets to invite everybody, anybody to come.

Then Bebb challenged them to go throughout the city and bring in anybody they could find to the meal. And they did. And here they came and filled the hall, as strange a menagerie as you could imagine in one place at the same time. Daughters of the American Revolution and bikers on Harleys. A family just leaving their Laundromat, street people, a Muslim in African dress. A woman who had been stood up at a restaurant. Hung over college students.

When the hall was filled and the party begun, Bebb stood up and said to the guests:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a great feast. That's the way of it. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a love feast where nobody's a stranger. Like right here...

He went on:

We all got secrets. I got them same as everybody else—things we feel bad about and wish hadn't ever happened. Hurtful things. Long ago things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like everyone of us is lost so bad we don't even know which way is home

anymore. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and sick? Why what would happen is we'd find out home is each other. We'd find out home is Jesus loves us lost or found or any which way. (*Love Feast*, pp. 60-61)

Do you know you're invited too? And you don't have to pretend.

III

The parable is not quite over. The servants came back and reported. The dinner hall was partly filled. So the host sent his servants out again, "Go into the roads and highways and *compel* them to come in, *so that my house shall be filled.*" That may be a sub-theme all through Luke: "That my house shall be filled."

And that's another place we come in. We who've been invited to the table of grace now go out into our community and compel them to come in. There's room at the table!

There are all kinds of people who need a place like Grace. People who wonder whether they belong. Maybe it's race or economic class or sexual orientation. Maybe people who feel they've made too many mistakes. Or those not sure of what they believe or whether they believe. Maybe they have felt the condemnation and rejection of the church and silently left.

I've told you the story of when my church in Charlotte, Myers Park Baptist, was thrown out of the N.C. State Baptist Convention because of our full welcome to LGBT persons. When they voted to boot us out it passed by about 2,990 to 12!

The next day *The Charlotte Observer* made us their front page headline, with the word EXPELLED in the largest type I had seen in that paper.

Later that day, I went to my local Wachovia branch where I banked. When I walked in, everyone working there started cheering and clapping. When I went to the teller's desk, she said, her eyes wet with tears: "Now we know that when you folks say, "God loves everyone, you mean *everybody*."

I think Grace is such a place. And I think people are looking for a church who when they say, God loves everybody mean *everybody*, and when they sing "All are welcome", they mean *all* are welcome. Can we be a parable of the kingdom of God in our community. A parable like this community?

This is what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus said when he told the parable. The Welsh poet and pastor R.S. Thomas described the Kingdom of God in his poem, "The Kingdom" in these words.

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

Come to the table.