Chapter 12

Inclusion

The Parable of the Great Dinner[1]
{Luke 14:16-24}
Brad Mckinnon

One Main Thing

There's something special, spiritual even, about welcoming outsiders—the marginalized and excluded. It's part of what it means to receive the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

Food and hospitality are prominent themes in the gospel of Luke. These motifs appear in the

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[1] I have found the following books particularly helpful in my studies of Jesus' parables: Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014); Alyce M. McKenzie, *The Parables for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Eugene H. Peterson, *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008)

temptation narrative, the stories of Jesus' miracles, His sayings or teachings, and even His resurrection appearances (4:1–13; 9:12–17; 11:1–4; 14:34–35; 24:28–35, 41–43). In addition, Jesus was challenged for His social habits centering around the table. For example, He was accused of being a glutton and drunkard and criticized for eating with tax collectors and "sinners" (5:30; 7:34). And of course, many of Jesus' parables focused on food and hospitality. As one scholar has put it, you can find yourself figuratively eating your way through Luke's gospel.[2]

Setting

Jesus' parables in Luke are fascinating on many levels. For instance, most of them don't seem to be predetermined. Jesus is acting more like a village storyteller, than a preacher or teacher. Making His way from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, Jesus travels from hamlet to hamlet and house to house telling stories. He crafts these stories or parables in response to questions, requests, accusations, and His own personal observations.

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[2] Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2006).

One such parable is the Parable of the Great Dinner in Luke 14. As the scene begins, Jesus is invited for Sabbath dinner at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. Folks are returning from worshiping together, but instead of celebrating what they had in common, everyone is watching Jesus suspiciously. Along the way, Jesus encounters a man suffering from dropsy or edema.[3] Even though it was the Sabbath, Jesus heals the man, establishing the principle that it's never wrong to do the right thing. As guests begin to file in for the meal, Jesus notices them scrambling for the most prominent seats. He warns, "Don't exalt yourself or you'll be humbled. But if you humble yourself you'll be exalted." Then, He turns His attention to the host and exhorts:

> When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be

[3] Edema is a swelling of the organs and skin caused by the build up of fluid in the body's tissues. It can cause weight gain, severe pain, and difficulty with mobility.

> blessed, because they cannot repay you,
> for you will be repaid at the resurrection
> of the righteous. (14:12–14, NRSV)

Ha! Jesus accepts the host's invitation and then proceeds to criticize the guest list! Obviously, Jesus was not above breaking social conventions now and again to make a point. In the process, however, He frames hospitality as a spiritual experience that brings a blessing in the life to come.

Here Jesus suggests four categories of those not to be invited and four categories of those to be invited. First, who shouldn't be invited? It's interesting that these are the people we're most likely to interact with socially—friends, siblings, relatives, neighbors. Why not invite them? Maybe because it's what's expected. Or, you might feel a familial responsibility. Too, there may exist an ulterior motive of some sort. But, what about those you're supposed to invite—the poor and those with physical disabilities? It wasn't unusual in the ancient world to think of the poor or disabled as cursed by God (John 9:1–3) and somehow religiously inferior (see Lev 21:18; 2 Sam 5:8). These sorts of folks certainly couldn't return the favor, and your association with them may harm your reputation in the process.

It must have made everyone in attendance uncomfortable to hear Jesus criticizing how the host filled the allotted guest spots. In those moments of awkward silence, sometimes we're tempted to speak out of turn. In our story, one of the invitees sitting with Jesus blurts out: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" "Indeed," you can almost hear Jesus saying, "let me tell you what the Kingdom of God is really like." Addressing His fellow guests, Jesus tells a story about a man hosting a great dinner.

Interpretation

In the parable, there are three groups of invitees to the dinner. First, there are the excuse makers who decline the invitation. One has just bought a field. One has bought ten oxen. Another has just been married. As many have recognized, these excuses mirror those in Deuteronomy 20, a passage that outlines the acceptable excuses for requesting leave from military service in Israel (v. 5–7). If you've built a house, go home and dedicate it. If you've planted a vineyard, go home and enjoy its fruit. If you're engaged to be married, go home and marry your fiancée. But how does the master of the house in our story respond to these sorts of excuses? Jesus says he reacted in anger. Apparently, even acceptable excuses for not

helping to defend your community and country don't work in the Kingdom of God.[4] The second group are those who hang out on the streets and in the lanes—these match the four categories Jesus mentioned earlier (the poor, maimed, blind, and lame). These are the cursed. The worthless. The excluded. The untouchables. And the third group is made up of those found on the outskirts of town—at the highways and in the hedges. These are the outsiders and marginalized, who are not welcome in traditional political, social, and religious circles.

Application

So what picture does Jesus paint of the Kingdom of God in this parable? It seems there were some in Jesus' day who should have been ready for what was unfolding in His ministry. Unfortunately, they did not recognize it and respond favorably, apparently because it deviated from their preconceived expectations. Today, I wonder if those of us who have been privileged socially, educationally, and religiously would have fared any better in appreciating Jesus' purpose. On the

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[4] John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 142.

other hand, how happy are those who have been excluded for so long to finally receive acceptance?

So what does real Christianity look like? It's an environment of inclusion—living life in community, where everyone has a place. This reminds me of the popular 1980s sitcom tagline, "Sometimes you wanna go, where everybody knows your name." There seems to be something deeply human about needing to feel welcome and included. However, much to our shame, the human family has also had a tendency to practice exclusion to the detriment of community.

So how do we practice inclusiveness? It may literally include creating worship spaces and services that are accessible to the physically disabled. It may include being intentional and taking active steps at being a guest-friendly church. It may include recognizing the imago Dei in everyone, despite the significance of social constructs like race and class. It may include recognizing the two greatest commandments: loving God and loving your neighbor. It may even include asking ourselves what it would really be like to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, especially those about some sort of reversal of fortunes: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:20–21).

Conclusion

In the hours just before His death, Jesus acted as host rather than guest (Luke 22). One of the themes of the evening seemed to be inclusion. I think the personal pronouns are significant. "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you." "Take this and divide it among yourselves." "This is my body, which is given for you." "This cup that is poured out for you ." The group seated with Jesus was in many ways a motley crew—some fishermen, a tax collector, an extreme nationalist, and a traitor to name a few—but they were all welcome at the table.

Likewise, disciples today gather at the table each week to better understand life in community. Despite our differences, we proclaim solidarity with Christ and with each other. Now, appreciating inclusion doesn't mean denying any expectations. After all, those invited had to respond favorably to participate in the blessings at the master's table. However, inclusion means just that—inclusion. Inclusion for the insider prepared to receive the invitation to the banquet, but also for the outsider who might not look the part or comprehend standard religious jargon. And yet still there is room, and the invitation still stands in order to fill God's house at the kingdom banquet. As I reflect on this parable, I'm reminded of the words of the marvelous poem by Jan Richardson:

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.
. . .
And we will become bread
for a hungering world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.[5]

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[5] Jan L. Richardson, "And the Table Will Be Wide" (excerpt), The Painted Prayerbook (blog), September 30, 2012, http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/. Used with permission.

Discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus suggests not inviting your friends, relatives, or rich neighbors to dinner? How would you explain the significance of such a reversal of typical social customs?

2. How would it change things in our homes, churches, and communities, if the ones typically excluded from our activities were the first ones to receive an invitation and the first ones we sought to serve?

3. What steps has your congregation taken to be a more guest-friendly church? What facilities and services are provided for those with special needs?

4. How well has the twenty-first century church done in taking Jesus' teachings on inclusion seriously? What improvements do you think can be made?