

“An Empty Hall”

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Isaiah 25:6-8 + Luke 14:15-24 = the empty banquet hall

What’s a host to do? This is the most disastrous banquet ever ~ an empty hall.

The worst snub: the height of disrespect when people RSVP “Yes, we’re coming” and then everyone to a person stiffs the host and hostess by not showing. And the expense! What’s a hostess to do?



That’s the dilemma Jesus presents in this parable ~ how to redeem a celebration which has turned into a disaster. Jesus compares the kingdom to a great banquet prepared and none of the guests arrive ~ the hall is ready but empty. Jesus is telling us God’s great kingdom party is ready, but those first invited all cannot be bothered. What is God to do?

In ancient times, double invitations were the norm, sent out to avoid this very possibility. Very different from our pattern today, in ancient times each round of invitations came complete with the whole guest list.



If the beautiful people are coming, all come. If the persons of high social capital stay away, all stay away. In Jesus’ parable the “right people” vote with their feet, turning down the invitation and the rest follow suit on the flimsiest of excuses ~ excuses so outrageous as to be calculated insults.



But the fatted calf is on the Barbie; the vegetables all cooked. The cakes are just popping out of the oven. The tent is up, the wine decanting and the caterers demanding to be paid. *But the hall is empty.* What are a host and hostess to do? What is God to do when the kingdom is rejected ~ rejected by the “right people” on the most frivolous of reasons?

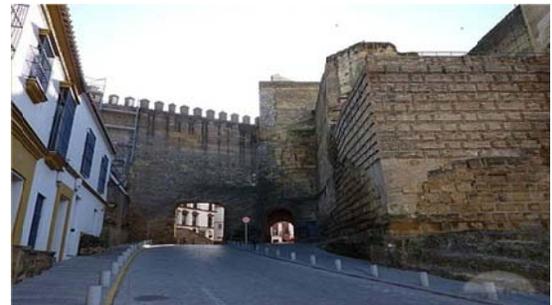
In all societies, it is moral obligation of the highest order for food and festivities and good feelings not to be wasted. But surprise: it is decidedly not critical whether the “right people” enjoy the festivities or not.



Consider this: Susan tells the story of something that happened when she attended one of her high school reunions. At the reunion everyone was abuzz with speculation as to whether one of her classmates, a one-hit wonder rock star, whether he would be showing up. A number may have come just because they thought he was going to be there. Folks kept looking scanning the faces. In the end, he didn't show but the party went on anyway and the festivities were just as joyful without him. His absence did not ruin the event at all.

Just so in God's kingdom when God's purpose and plans are rejected. If the socially deemed “right people” stay away, then the socially deemed “wrong people” show up instead. God invites everyone in. God joyfully receives all those who respond to the invitation, even those who society would consider common and coarse or outsiders or even rejected ones. God treats them with the same care and attention as that prepared for visiting royalty. That's Godly grace.

Banquets in ancient times such as the one in our parable start in the late afternoon. They take place in the elite, walled-off part of the city ~ a gated community strictly off limits to everyone except the rich residents who live within. At the appointed hour of the banquet, the neighborhood gates are locked and guarded to keep all non-elites out. Inviting non-elites into this section of town would result in the harshest censure. Yet that is



precisely what this desperate host does.¹



The householder orders the slaves to open the gates and bring folks in from the public square. Social strictures be hanged, he has a house to be filled! These guests would include village peasants with whom the master has a relationship of landlord and tenant. These folks have no hope of ever repaying the social obligation created by accepting this invitation.

Yet the house is still not full! To quote Jesus directly, the master specifies that the slaves bring in “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,” all persons who are even less able to reciprocate.



Yet the house is still not full!? So the master orders his slaves to go outside the city to bring in the “least of these,” the outcasts, those not allowed to live within the city, some not allowed even to enter the city ~ lepers, beggars, landless peasants, tanners, traders, day laborers, inn keepers, the homeless, tax collectors, prostitutes.²

God’s grace is precisely this. We have no possibility whatsoever of reciprocating. What we have to offer God is infinitesimally small compared to what God offers us for free. God has already given us all the gifts there are to give, life itself, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, free will and the capacity for growth, among many others.

God has already thrown the party. All God asks of us in return is to respond to the invitation, join the party and joyfully to celebrate with God the great bridal feast of the Lamb. All God requires from us in response to unconditional grace is gratitude. And there it is: grace and gratitude. We return God’s unmerited favor with our gratitude.

At the Emmys or Oscars when the camera pans over the audience notice that the house is always full. Every seat is filled. This is hard to accomplish because many of the invited guests and dignitaries on some whim may not show up at the last minute. This is rectified by employing a whole army of actors and actresses, B, C and even D-list, as “seat fillers,” prepared to take any seat needed to make sure the auditorium is filled and the camera angles are all covered.



Who would possibly turn down God’s gracious invitation? Surprisingly, many do. What does God our divine hostess do? The banquet hall is so large it can accommodate everyone who has ever lived. The good news is

God invites us. The bad news is God expects us to attend. If we don't, if we blow off the invitation, there are C-list and D-list folk ready to take our place.

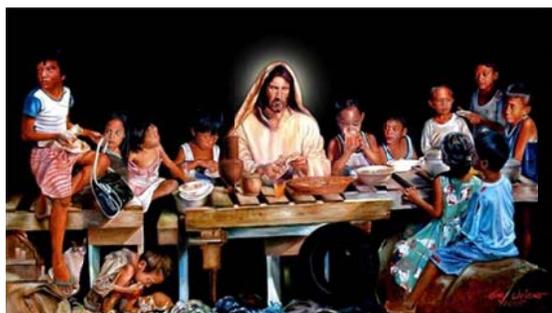
The diversity of living in God's realm raised no end of problems in the first century church, because one of the defining characteristics of the early church was precisely table fellowship across lines of race, class and gender. The tensions in the early church over table fellowship were particularly pronounced for the followers of Jesus from the elite classes. Social connection is everything for the wealthy.³ Elite converts risked being cut off from all family and social networks if they were seen eating with persons of lower rank.⁴



Jesus critiqued these divisions in the strongest terms. Jesus has high hopes for his church. His mandate is still for us to reach across lines of race, class and gender. Jesus was constructing a new society of equality before God and with one another, not just replicating the old dying, worldly order. And yet 20 centuries later, we are still struggling with the very divisions that Jesus wanted to exclude from the kingdom.



Jesus does give us a clear picture of the kingdom: people of all social strata, outsiders, the hurting, the vulnerable, from every race and tongue



and nation, altogether in fellowship and worship and mission. For Jesus, the premier sign of God's reign is a table ~ Native American and Asian, Middle-Eastern, African and European faces around the table ~ old and young, rich, middle class, working class, unemployed, homeless; conservatives and liberals, hetero and Gay, crippled, blind and lame around God's table. All human differences gone; all human barriers to faithful fellowship no longer hold. God's kingdom is filled with the people who respond in gratitude to God's grace-filled invitation.

All God requires from us in response to grace is gratitude.
Grace and gratitude!

Enjoy God's party.
Come to the feast.



¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (2nd Edition, Fortress Press, 2003) pp. 286-7

² *Ibid*

³ Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Revised Edition, aha! Process, 2013) p. 57

⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Op.Cit.* pp. 286-7