

Fed by Grace | Food in the Gospels

Invitations

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Luke 14.1-24

It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. ² And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. ³ And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" ⁴ But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵ And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" ⁶ And they could make no reply to this.

⁷ And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. ¹⁰ "But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. ¹¹ "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹² And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. ¹³ "But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

¹⁵ When one of those who were reclining at the table with Him heard this, he said to Him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶ But He said to him, "A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; ¹⁷ and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' ¹⁹ "Another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' ²⁰ "Another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.' ²¹ "And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' ²² "And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' ²³ "And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ 'For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"

We're moving from Christmas to Easter and we're walking with at the main character, the Star of the Story (Rev 22.16; Mal 4.2) as He travels toward His great goal, WHICH IS *to be broken like bread and become spiritual food for the world*. He is determined to get to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51) (like a salmon swims upstream to give LIFE and then die) Jesus Christ is going to Jerusalem to die and give His life a ransom for many.

On His way, He teaches and announces that the reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven is breaking in and evil will be **UNDONE**. He demonstrates what the reign of God looks like; in fact, this is His mission-statement. He quotes the Prophet Isaiah and says of HIMSELF:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me; He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." (Luke 4.18-19)

AND...He eats and drinks with people. This is His great strategy (seems sort of underwhelming) and yet, this is where ordinary human life takes place and so... "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking."

Today, *THIS* is the very topic: food events, food gatherings, dinner parties, luncheons, GET TOGETHERS and *how* the *Reign* or *Kingdom* of God actually changes how we act as guests at these happenings, how we act as hosts...and the topic above ALL: *how God Himself goes about hosting and inviting guests to His Big Party*. INVITATIONS and the whole idea of networks and arrangements and connections - THAT'S THE TOPIC FOR TODAY.

How do you go about selecting your friends and contacts? What criteria do you use?...What are your objectives in associating with people (and NOT associating with others)? AND how will that change if you become a Christian?

Let's look at 1) The Social Fabric 2) A Tear in the Social Fabric 3) How to be ONE OF "THEM"...and LIKE IT

One of the ways Jesus Christ seemed to get into trouble with His contemporaries was by His associations. He hung around with "them"...and "WE don't hang around with THEM". The people in charge, the party with the power (Pharisees) they were very particular about the company they kept and their exclusivity was for two reasons, the apparent reason (the one they'd give ya') AND the real reason (which they wouldn't talk about). They had a very deliberate line that explained why they were such an elite group and that was the Law. There were a lot of ways to get unclean...like having contact with dead things or with blood.

In Leviticus Ch. 14 there was a whole list of physical defects and diseases that would disqualify a person from distributing food from the Temple. People with any of the disabilities listed could *eat* the food that came from the altar but *they* couldn't go behind the curtain/veil and couldn't have any contact with the altar or couldn't dispense the food...And we can understand that. First, all these priests were like living symbols looking forward that ONE morally perfect Priest who would come who was spotless and impeccably loving, the Messiah. AND, in a time when they had little understanding of hygiene and of contagion and infection etc. this was a way to safeguard the food supply (for the poor).

But even though they *looked* like they were very pure and holy and Lawful... they also hid behind their LAWFULNESS. They associated with people who were socially profitable. Their relationships were all based on reciprocation – I scratch your back your scratch mine...and there IS something to that. In other words, if a relationship is mutually destructive or abusive then it's got to change or be discontinued.

But for the Pharisees...and...I fear for everyone...their relationships were all calculated on whether they were profitable. What have you done for me lately? I always want to associate UP...to gain contacts...to put myself at an advantage...to gain money, respect, prestige, to have friends in high places...Because, what I really want is the high place, or the ability to impress or the power...and the friends/associates or acquaintances are really ONLY important as a MEANS TO AN END. I use my associations to get the stuff I really want – sex, money and power.

It sounds a lot like High School...and the reason we may connect it with High School or Middle School is that IT IS THEN WHEN WE FIRST REALIZE this system of reciprocity and because we're not yet savvy enough to mask it... BUT it happens at every age, people in the IN-CROWD, people using one another not because there's any genuine affection but because I like how YOU make me look. And the reason I know that it DOESN'T go away after High School is that I've been to a HS reunion!

And I found that it's still happening...maybe a bit more subtlety... but just as ugly as ever.

Now, when Jesus goes to this luncheon at one of the Cool Kid's house ("a LEADER of the Pharisees"). there's a man with a disability, "suffering from dropsy" (v. 2). Whether he was a plant we don't know but ...sort of suspicious. And when Jesus apparently knowing that something was fishy... "Answered" (interesting word!) and asked them about the Law. And this LAW that they used to justify their meanness and exclusivity, Jesus asks, "If you object to me helping this man on this Lawful day of rest...would you also object to helping an animal or a son on the LAWFUL day of rest?"

They would ALL save an ox or a son that fell into a well on the Sabbath... So... "jus' being consistent", Jesus heals the man with dropsy on the Sabbath. AND He's really saying, "C'mon

guys let's not hide behind the Law...if you don't want to extend mercy to people, that's bad...but if you blame your lack of mercy on God and His Law...that's even worse!"

If you don't want to hang around needy people ("them") because they can't do anything to improve your social standing, that's bad. But if you try to blame the Law (of the Sabbath or the unclean laws or any other laws) if you claim that God is commanding your meanness – well now you're really bad!

So...if it's NOT the Law that's making you mean, what is it? And that's when Jesus Christ, points to this social fabric, this system of reciprocity. "You people USE each other for what you can get...You have this insatiable desire to step over others to get what you want. It happens when you're invited somewhere... (vv. 7-11) you try to position yourself to make others think you're important...you do it when YOU DO the inviting (vv.12-14), inviting ONLY people who will make you look good...people who can reciprocate and get you into better circles..."

And then Jesus concludes this section on relating to others from a profit-motive (commodification of relationships) and He turns to God's way of inviting. It's a parable about a wealthy man who invites important people but they're all too important and too busy and...they all have other things to do.

So...the rich man reaches out...to...to THEM. He invites people who won't do ANYTHING to improve the man's standing/status or prestige or make him look good. He invited people with ...issues... people with disabilities... "poor, crippled, blind and lame". And then a third wave, "those in the highways and hedges" i.e. the utterly destitute and homeless, the crazies and the kooks, the ones who have to be carried and compelled; when you invite them they'll think it's a trick because rich men NEVER take notice of them, never mind invite them for a banquet...so you'll have to convince them...compel them to come in because I want to have a big, BIG PARTY! Now two final questions on this point – one question you may not have asked and ONE YOU'RE DYING TO KNOW. 1) Why did Jesus go to that luncheon with all those mean cool kids? It's the third time to a Pharisee's house (this time a "leader") so why is Jesus so slow to learn that these guys are NO fun? V.1: "They were watching Him closely..." – who wants to go to THAT kind of party? Do you?

And the only answer I have is that Jesus Christ loves those mean Pharisees and He desperately wants them to see. I'm so glad He loves Pharisees and mean people... "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so..."

The second question, the burning question you're dying to know: What in the world is dropsy?

I thought it was like loose joints – weak limbs – but what it really is is insatiable thirst in a body that can't process water. The body gets bloated and swollen and the thirst becomes maniacal and uncontrollable. Just like these Pharisees were thirsting for recognition and prestige and

status all ways that people could be USED to make them feel good about themselves...feel powerful and secure... they were drinking in the praise of people...but it just made them bloated and swollen and uncontrollably thirsty for something no amount of human acclaim could give...and still they thirst for more...AND Jesus Christ took hold of Him and healed him. He can do that.

Now the second point, A TEAR IN THE SOCIAL FABRIC: Jesus Christ went into the Temple where the crippled and lame and blind were not allowed. He cleansed the Temple and drove out the moneymakers and commodifiers...and then... in an odd passage, Matthew 21, v. 14 we read this, "And *the* blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant..."

The way it works is that uncleanness gets on a person if they have any contact with it...that's the universal and unbreakable law of the clean and unclean. The unclean is always stronger. The contaminant always wins.

But in this ONE, in Jesus Christ, clean-ness triumphs over the unclean. He touches dead bodies and rather than HIS becoming unclean, death gives way, and the dead come to life. He tore the fabric, He came through the curtain, the veil of the Temple; the Holy came through like we had never seen before. God came down, LOVE CAME DOWN. And not only does He tear the curtain between Heaven and Earth, between the Holy God and sinful people, HE ALSO BREAKS DOWN THE WALL BETWEEN "US" and "THEM" (Eph 2.14ff; Gal 3.28) He opens a new way of relating not based on reciprocity!

He is the God who invites with NO expectation of what the guests might bring to the Table. The system of reciprocity is turned upside down, it's reversed.

God has taken the form of a servant and He eats with sinners and with those who were not allowed into the Holy Place...so Holiness came to them, came to us. If you're unclean, the blind and the lame, come unto Me and I will make you clean.

But to the busy and the better...to those who have more important things to do...those who don't see that they are poor and wretched and blind... "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked... Behold I stand at the door and knock..."(Rev 3.17, 20) If those Pharisees could only have seen themselves and if WE could only SEE ourselves for the needy people we are...bloated with stuff and privilege and status and the envy of the whole planet but IT CAN NOT QUENCH...all this stuff leaves us only sick and frenzied and only Jesus Christ can heal us and quench the fire...

But the good GOOD NEWS is, He crossed the great divide and tore the fabric of holiness and the

social fabric of “reciprocity” and WE WHO BELIEVE, WE ARE THE “THEM” who hear His invitation and who come...We have to be compelled...He has to show us that this TOO-GOOD-TO-BE-TRUE offer really is True and He proves it by finishing the journey...He goes to Jerusalem and dies and rises and says to the THEMS, to the needy and crippled and poor and HE SAYS, “See from My head, My hands, My feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down...” see that the offer is real, won’t THIS compel you to come in?

Do you see how serious this invitation IS, how badly I want you in My Big, BIG PARTY? I will live the life you failed to live and die the death you deserve to die, just to have you...to COMPEL you to come in.”

Last point: how to be one of “THEM” and like it: how to practice this new way of Kingdom relating:

1) Learn to practice hospitality. Share meals with people. If you live in a closet, then take someone to a restaurant. Start small but stay at it. We all have a lot to learn here.

2) Move toward different people. If you’re a Christian you must have that wonderfully liberated LOW self-esteem that sees that you are the worst kind of person (like Paul, “Chief of sinners”) so you know that you’re “THEM” and you can feel at home with outcasts (poor, lame, blind, wretched) ASK GOD TO SHOW YOU WHAT YOU HAVE IN COMMON WITH THESE FOLKS. It could be wonderful!

3) Ask God to make you wildly generous. You’re headed to a Big, BIG Party so give away time and money like you’re super rich and privileged (YOU ARE!).

4) Participate in God’s inviting. Compel people to come to the party. That’s what evangelism is. We should see it that way.

5) What about our church policy? What about our church leaders (myself included!)? How are we either moving this church toward God’s priorities in inviting the “THEMS” (our FELLOW “THEMS”!) or else resisting God’s priorities? Maybe ESL and Heart-to Heart and The Well are the most “godly” things we’re doing because they are reaching out to “THEM” (the immigrant, the elderly/powerless and the oppressed) – just sayin’!