

2 EPHESIANS

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Ephesians 2:11-22; Luke 14:1, 7-24

The Great Banquet

FIRST, MARSHALL

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*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe, and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

When I was in Fourth Grade, I was one of ten boys invited to the home of a classmate for his birthday...***It was a party that I did not want...to attend!*** The kid was a master at self-defeating behavior: he was selfish, spoiled rotten, and his “gift” in life was to irritate just about everyONE...just about ***all the time!***

So...when I heard that my two best friends were going to ditch the party, I told my mom that I was going to do the same... It was a conversation that didn't go exactly as I'd hoped...and in no time at all I found myself hiking uptown to buy the boy a birthday present at the Dime Store.

24 hours later I walked to the kid's house and rang the bell... It quickly became obvious that we were not gonna need much time at all...to open presents... **Want to guess how many guests showed up for the party?** 1...me!!

In one way I was mad that **I** had to be the sacrificial lamb led to the slaughter...**but**...in another way, even against my will...I was glad that my mom made me go.

It's gotta hurt to throw a party and have no one show up...which is exactly what we hear in Jesus' parable for today from the 14th chapter of Luke's Gospel ... a party that no one who was invited wanted to attend...



By this time in Jesus' ministry, he has ended his work in the outlying areas of the country, and now he's turned his face toward Jerusalem... In other words, he knows...that now...he's walking...toward his death.

Some friendly Pharisees try to convince Jesus to stay out of the city. They come and urge him, *Get out of here – King Herod wants to kill you!!* (Luke 13:31).

Yet, in a very real sense, I'm guessing Jesus just looks at them, and says...*Duh!!! So do lots of folks!!* And on he walks...

Chapter 14 opens with the Lord actually stepping into the *lions' den* of sorts, by attending a dinner at the home of an unfriendly Pharisee...one who is definitely NOT a fan. They argue about religious laws, about seeking fame in society, and about caring for people who have no one to care for them. Jesus refers to these unfortunate people as *the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame...*

It's a catch-all phrase, yet one that's full of meaning – and here's why. The popular assumption was that anyone who was *poor, crippled, blind or lame* was being punished by God for some sin. In chapter 9:2 of John's Gospel, we're told that Jesus and the disciples come upon a man whom everyone knows was blind from birth – he's never been able to see. The disciples, the disciples, the disciples ask Jesus, *Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, to cause his blindness???*

Really???? So if SOMEONE is *poor, crippled, blind or lame* – then someone in that family has made God mad??? *Who sinned*, the disciples asked, *this man or his parents???*

This question is delightfully significant for our story, because, as it turns out, those are the very people who are seated first at the master’s banquet! Take a look at verse 21 –When the A-list folks *respond with regrets*, the man says to his slave, *Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame!*

This is a host who is bound and determined to have a party –
 -who’s bound and determined to have a party that people will enjoy –
 -who’s bound and determined to have a party where no one feels excluded...
Go and bring in: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame!

So...what is Jesus’ message here...and what does this mean for you and me???

First of all, let’s try to identify those A-listers, those who were too busy to respond to the Master’s invitation. Any ideas who *they* may be??

Well, I’m thinking that we probably look them in face every time we look in the mirror, no?? Which means, that they are much more like...you...and you...and me... more than we would like to admit. Can I get an AMEN???

We see ourselves in their responses:

I’m too busy...

I have important things to do...

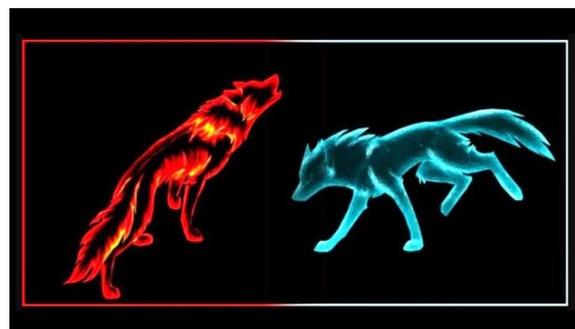
I don’t have time for this...

Ask someone else...

Maybe later...

Ask me next year...

And we know that this struggle is universal...



The story is told of a Native American elder who's having a conversation with his grandson about the nature of life. He shares with the boy the legend of the two wolves. Says the old man:

There are two wolves in the heart of every person – and every day they struggle for control. The one wolf is greed, envy, hatred, revenge, cruelty. The other wolf is peace, generosity, contentment, hope, and love.

The little boy thinks for a moment, and then asks his grandfather: *Which wolf will win?* The old man nods his head and says, *The one you feed...*

In this sense, the Master of the Banquet in Jesus' parable is no mystery...right? We all know that it's God...God, who daily invites all of us to let the good wolf in our hearts feast on the Lord's gift of grace, contentment, forgiveness, hope and love.

Yet the question we have to ask ourselves is this: **How's that daily invitation to feast on God's grace working for you?**

Probably about as well as it works for me... Which means it works VERY WELL when I take time for God... It's just that it's easy to let life's busy-ness distract us from the time we should be spending in prayer, or in service to God's call to love our neighbors...

And when we let that happen, when we allow ourselves to be consumed by life's cares...at least three other things happen – none of which are good.

- *The **first** is that it continues to get easier to avoid taking time for God.
- *The **second** is that it gets harder to navigate life's challenges in a peaceful and meaningful way – at least it does for me!
- *The **third** is that we will most likely wake up one day to find ourselves in joy-less, meaning-less spiritual wilderness – regardless of where we are.

Babette's Feast is the title of a beautiful story by the author Karen Blixen. The scene is a Scandinavian coastal village on the North Sea in the late 1800's. There, a pious, wholesome, faithful Lutheran family gathers a community of like-minded people. In the beginning, they find delight in letting their hearts feast on the gift of God's love.

Yet, as it often happens, the demands of life shift...and the peoples' minds, become focused on the things they HAVE to do, which ultimately overrules their hearts and even begins to silence their spirits.

Eventually, the founding father dies... yet, out of a sense of duty, his two daughters, along with the rest of the aging, dwindling community try to honor what they believe is the vision of their patriarch:

- they work hard to live by God's law (even if they sometimes break it!).
- they try to do what is required of them (though they all cheat a little!).
- they gather to worship (even if they find it boring!) and
- they care for the poor (even if they didn't care for them as *people!*)

The love of Christ has been forced to the back of the bus, and there it has to wait for the arrival of a little miracle...

Turns out, the miracle's name is Babette, a woman from Paris, France, who had to flee the atrocities of political upheaval. As a chef in an upper crust restaurant, she was targeted, and had to escape the city with just the clothes on her back.

A friend who had a relative in that small coastal town, sends Babette to find refuge among that serious little Lutheran community.

They welcome her in and she immediately goes to work with the sisters who daily fix food for the poor people in town. Their meals are anything BUT a feast. They are prepared from a sense of duty, not delight, nor love.

Day after day, the menu never changes: split-cod soup and ale bread. It's a tasteless gruel that – at best – is only slightly better than nothing!

But before long, Babette starts putting her talents to work by adding herbs and spices to the soup, and baking fresh loaves of savory bread. In no time at all, the recipients of her food are eager to feast on her cooking, as opposed to the tasteless gruel that had been hardly edible.

For 14 years, Babette serves the community as their cook, never asking anything for herself. Then one day, she hears from a friend in a now peaceful Paris – and the news is startling: Babette has won the national lottery!!!



It's a sadder day than normal for those morose Lutherans – for they all assume that Babette will now be returning to her home in Paris.

In fact, she does want to take a trip to the big city...but only for a short visit. What she really wants to do is to prepare a meal for these people who took her in when she had nowhere else to turn. She wants it to be a feast – the type of banquet that she used to prepare as the chef in her famous restaurant.

It's not an unreasonable request – and since Babette has never before asked them for anything, the leaders give their consent. However, it causes them more than a little anxiety – they're much better at denying the good things in life than they are in feasting on sumptuous dishes, fine wines and rich desserts... It's a frightening and foreign territory for them...but they gave their word so they promise to follow through!

Well, off to Paris Babette sails, then returns sometime later with a boat fully-laden with things like quails and turtles, baskets of fantastic fruits, wheels of pungent cheeses and crates of expensive wines. As each exotic load is carted up to the kitchen, the faces of the faithful grow more and more concerned – more and more alarmed.

In fact, these people begin to fear that simply by eating this meal, they will commit the sin of *indulgence*... dm, dm, dmmm!

So the night of the party they gather outside the dining room and, though they plan to follow through on their promise to eat the food, they also promise one another that: 1) **they will not enjoy it**, nor 2) will they even **speak** about it!

So armored against the temptations of the flesh, they enter the lion's den... with trembling and fear!

Well, with each bite of delicious food, and each sip of exquisite wine, their resolve begins to melt.



And then...something else happens: their frowns turn upside down into smiles, their tongues begin to loosen, and they start talking, *really* talking with each other.

-Old hurts that had been harbored for decades...are forgiven.

-Misunderstandings that had kept friends apart...are forgotten.

-The pall of unhappiness that had settled over their community is finally lifted as they re-discover the joy of the relationships they share as a community of faith.

In fact, at the end of the evening, those formerly frowsty people gather outside in a circle, holding hands and singing a song of praise for all that God has given them. It's the perfect ending, right?...except it's not the end of the story.

Though blessed by that magical event, the sisters share with Babette their sadness that she will now be leaving their community for good. However, that's when the former chef reveals the astounding news that she's not going anywhere – she can't! She's penniless: Babette spent every cent on that feast for her community.

And isn't this true also of God's great banquet that is laid out for us – you and me – here, today and everyday. It's a feast of love that cost God everything, yet willingly, Jesus paid the price.



This is God's goal for each of us – that we might always respond to the Lord's invitation, as the Psalmist says, *to come, taste and see that the Lord is good.*

And that we might always reach out to one another, to our neighbors near and far...extending our hands in friendship and love.

What a blessing for us to be able to invite one and all to feast daily at God's beautiful banquet of forgiveness, love and grace.

I can only think of one more thing to say: *Bon appetit!*

Amen.