

11/13/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl. We are glad you are joining us, including those who are watching on Zoom or may watch later.

May you be blessed in this time that you are joining us, whether that be in fellowship, in encouragement, or a particular challenge that you are needing.

INVOCATION

O God,

Let our imaginations run with the thought of your banquet with the richest of food, set for people of all nations.

We can't really grasp what that would be like or how you will accomplish it.

But let us hear what your Spirit has to say to us for today. Let us grasp the grace you are inviting us to receive and tear down whatever walls we have built in our hearts to loving people as you love. Amen

I want to let you know that Norman Schroeder continues to heal well and to make excellent progress in his physical and occupational therapy at NMC.

Also that Dan Bergen has moved to Bethesda for a time of rehab and recuperation. He'll work to regain some weight and strength.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Dear God, in this world where we rush and hurry and ring and buzz and tweet and meme, we come to this place and this time where we can be quiet, we can listen and reflect and learn... some of us might doze a bit in the warmth and comfort of this place and this time. God, you meet each of us just where we are. Your Spirit accompanies our spirits and we are grateful for this time of communing, intentionally, purposefully with you and with one another.

Thank you for the many things that make our lives rich and full, God. For music and musicals, for games and books, for teachers and students, for this community and the meal and resources we'll share together later today.

God, we are grateful for medical care. For hospitals and nursing homes and for those who work hard every day to care for those who need care. We're especially thankful for Bethesda, for Schowalter Villa and Kidron-Bethel, our most local facilities and the places where so many of our loved ones live and work. We pray for your continued guidance

and blessings on the work of these special places. We pray for continued stamina and wisdom for those who work there and for continued mercy and compassion for the residents – may they all know your love. We pray particularly for Dan Bergen as he enters a time of further healing and strengthening. Give him courage and patience. We pray also for Norman as he has made this remarkable recovery. Thank you, God that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, just as you intended. Continue to be with Leona too as she accompanies Norman on this journey of healing and aging. God, in these moments of silence we offer prayers for others we may know who need your healing... hear our prayers.

We lift in prayer those who suffer the pain of war and violence. For some that is very current and every day. For others there are painful and debilitating memories and experiences. God, for those who work for peace we pray for perseverance, courage and inspiration to keep up their energy as they follow your call to be peacemakers - bringing your kingdom here on earth.

Gracious God, by the power of your Spirit, slow us down, lift us up. Clear our minds, help us to see through the fog of so many choices in our lives. Give us ears to hear your invitation to your banquet, give us the will to turn toward you and run to you, the desire to celebrate in harmony with you and all that you have created. Give us the longing to learn of you and rest in you. We pray in the name of Jesus, the great truth and storyteller. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Loving God, you are the creator, the grower and the giver. Accept these gifts of money along with the gifts of our time and energy, the talents you have given us and the ways we use them. May our lives be a reflection of our love for you. Amen.

MAKING EXCUSES – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 14:15-24 CEB

The church I related to in Quito, Ecuador rented a large house with two floors. Worship services met in the largest room downstairs. The upstairs had several rooms that served as library, office space for the churches refugee ministries, and meeting spaces.

There were two women in the congregation that walked with crutches and could do stairs with great difficulty. On at least one occasion, we were having a class upstairs and one of these women was attending. No one had thought about the fact that it would have been much more hospitable and inclusive to have set up for the class in the downstairs space.

The member did feel snubbed by the lack of consideration, but fortunately she could accept a sincere apology after we moved downstairs.

Many years before, Jesus told a parable in which a great banquet is thrown. The first people invited make excuses, and don't come. So, the host instead invites people who are poor, blind, or have disabilities.

This is one of my favorite parables. The parable is clearly turning the tables on how people normally thought about a banquet. But what was Jesus trying to say with this parable?

Jesus told a story about a banquet while at a banquet. He was invited by a prominent Pharisee, which meant that Jesus could feel honored by getting invited. Luke also tells us that Jesus was being watched carefully for what he might say or do that is out of line.

It happens to be the Sabbath day when you are not supposed to work according to the Torah. But there is a man nearby with abnormal swelling. Jesus decides to start a theological debate with a Bible interpretation question – is it OK to heal someone on the Sabbath?

Jesus he goes ahead and heals him, probably insulting his host by issuing a challenge. Then Jesus gives two banquet-centered teachings to the guests:

If you are at a feast, don't try to get one of the past spots in the seating arrangement. In their culture, people arranged themselves according to their level of honor, and Jesus challenges this.

Next, he gives an even bigger challenge: when you are the host, don't invite your friends and relatives or wealthy neighbors – people who can invite you back.

Invite the “poor, crippled, lame, and blind” – people who do not have a way to invite you back or repay. Such guests would certainly not reflect well on the host.

After all this, one of the guests says, “Blessed is anyone who feasts in the kingdom of God.” Is this person changing the subject, or does he know that Jesus' teaching has already been giving a window into the kingdom of God?

This is where our parable begins.

Jesus describes an ordinary dinner party put on by someone of means, but everyone listening also knows he is saying something about the great feast of the kingdom of God at the end of the age.

You can go as far back to the prophet Isaiah who described such a feast:

“The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.” (It maybe isn’t for people with special dietary concerns, because the Hebrew tells us this meal will have plenty of fat.) This will be the time when death will be no more. There will no longer be division and conflict between the nations.

So, there is a long history of anticipating a great feast at the end of the age. Jesus didn’t invent that. But it wasn’t always clear who would be invited.

Isaiah’s vision is inclusive of all peoples. But as soon as an Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah was written, this was turned around. The invitation would be a kind of trap, and whatever non-Jews attend would suffer terrible plagues.¹

Then around 100 years before Jesus’ time a prophetic book attributed to Enoch was written. This prophecy said that the rulers of the earth – non-Jews – would beg for mercy from this guy with divine authority called the “Son of Man.”

But that Son of Man won’t have mercy. He’ll deliver the enemies to “the angels for punishments in order that vengeance shall be executed on them...”

So then, the feast is for just the righteous and chosen ones who are saved on that last day. They get to “eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever.”²

There’s also a document called the “*Messianic Rule*” found in the same caves as the Dead Sea scrolls. This document gives rules for who can enter the assembly of God: “No man smitten in his flesh, or paralysed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish,” it says.

When the Messiah comes, able-bodied people will sit down to feast in order of their dignity (what Jesus just said not to do, by the way).³

What’s all that got to do with anything?

Jesus didn’t make up his parable out of thin air. There were already a lot of ideas floating around, and Jesus’ teaching and parable differs at key points that we’ll see.

In Jesus’ parable, the host invites honored guests to the banquet. Normally, you had two invitations. The first let people know there will be a banquet, and the guests have a little time to figure out who else will be there. The host has an idea of how many people to expect and butchers an animal in order to prepare a feast.

¹ Bailey, Kenneth. *Through Peasant Eyes*, 1980, p. 90

² 1 Enoch 62:9-14; James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York: Yale University Press, 1983), 43–44.

³ Quoted in Bailey; also https://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/scrolls_deadsea/deadseascrolls_english/06.htm

They weren't super time-precise like modern Westerners, and instead it was ready when it was ready. So that's when the servant goes out to tell the esteemed guests that everything is ready.

But they shockingly make excuses. One has bought a field, another has bought five pair of oxen, and a third just got married.

In previous weeks we've noticed how the parables usually start with a comparison that is more or less true to life as it was in Jesus' day. But then there is a twist. Sometimes the twists are obvious and sometimes it's helpful to know a little more about the culture.

You can think of parables as being a little like a sitcom. TV Sitcoms are full of situations that play out in a humorous way that is not like real life. If they were completely like real life, they would be boring and we wouldn't watch them.

Sitcoms are full of these awkward moments, but you it's because we are from the same culture that we get the humor. In the same way, we can sort of see centuries later how the excuses of the parable are lame. But they are more than lame. They are implausible and insulting.

You don't buy a field or oxen without looking at them first. Just like you wouldn't buy a house or farmland today without seeing it. The excuses insult the intelligence of the host and basically send the message: "we are too good for this invitation."

So what's the host to do? There's all this food that will go to waste! The host invites the outcast – people without honor or ability to reciprocate. Poor people and disabled people. The people excluded from the assembly.

But there is still more room! So now the servant looks for guests outside the city wall, people not allowed inside after dark. This might include beggars, prostitutes, leather tanners that stink, and otherwise people without land to farm.

They have to be convinced to enter the city at a time when they weren't allowed with an unbelievable invitation unlike anything they'd ever receive.

The original guests don't get to taste the banquet. The host snubs them by inviting outcasts. But they also excluded themselves by deciding they were too good for this banquet.

For centuries, Christians have understood the parable to be about the Messiah's banquet of the last days. The first guests to be the religious insiders of Israel. They scorn the invitation by opposing Jesus. The poor and disabled people are understood to

represent the outcast of Israel. Finally, the last group – the people outside the city represent the Gentiles.

What a contrast from the ideas that had been floating around about the Messiah's banquet! This banquet is all-inclusive!

THE BANQUET IS A SCANDAL

This banquet Jesus describes is a problem. It sets up a scandal. How can this kind of inclusion be possible?

- What if a Ukrainian child whose parents were killed in the war, comes to the banquet and sees the very Russian soldiers responsible for the death of his parents?
- What if a woman comes to the banquet and sees there a former abusive partner?
- What if families of color sit down next to white supremacists?

How is it possible for all to be included and also be able to celebrate? These are hard questions. At the present time, it is not always possible to have both inclusion and safety for everyone, both inclusion and justice.

We don't fully know how the Messianic banquet will unfold in God's grace. Accepting the invitation is just the first step. Jesus signals that there must also be transformation of people. In Luke's Gospel the parable of the banquet is followed by a passage about the cost of discipleship. Matthew's version of the parable pointedly says that both good and bad are invited, but the guests must wear wedding clothes -- symbolizing the transformation.

When we come together to eat in God's feast, we also must journey together in repentance and transformation toward reconciliation and peace.

Living this vision out is hard. The first Christians struggled to do it. For example, Paul criticized the Corinthians for still being divided along class lines at their meals. The rich congregated together and ate all the food, leaving the poorer members hungry (1 Corinthians 11).

It is a struggle to know how to practice an inclusive vision. All Christians are agreed that some kind of change of our sinful condition is needed. Yet we spend considerable energy arguing about which behaviors or choices are sinful and which are not. Who gets to pretend they are insiders and without sin, and who has to first get their "act together," before they can be included without stigma.

In this parable, I don't see the master first saying to the folks in the streets and outside the city: "First change in these specific ways, and only then we might consider letting

you in. First make sure you measure up." No, they are invited as they are, as unworthy people.

Sure, we this parable by itself is not enough to tell us just how to go about being church. It speaks primarily to the Messiah's banquet; which God will carry out as God sees fit.

But remember that earlier in chapter 14, Jesus also says, *"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed...."*

In these words, Jesus signals that we should hear the parable of the Great Banquet in two ways. First, we should hear it as a revelation of God's incredible invitation to us. Second, we should hear it as an example to follow. We are to go and do likewise.

This is hard. If you apply this challenge of inviting people who can't reciprocate to the realm of church, you find that few churches know how to practice this. Very often we are fellowships of people who are relatives or friends. If rich neighbors start attending, even better -- that would solve our budget worries.

God's call in Jesus' parable is to first invite. Then as slowly learn how to live together in God's reign, even if it means letting go of some cherished traditions, we make our journeys of transformation together and are blessed.

It is like these polished brass handbells. Elroy tells me there was a time when they weren't in good shape. They were refurbished, but the brass is the same. It simply took some elbow grease and the right compound to restore them to a shine.

It is not that we can all stay just as we are. We need transformation of our lives, our character, and our selves.

But suppose we take the attitude that we are the insiders and don't have to fundamentally change. *Those* people need to change before they can be accepted. In that case, we are involved in the very self-righteousness that Jesus condemned.

It is true that the Gospels contain words of judgment. I don't deny that or try to paint a nice sanitized, naïve picture. But notice who Jesus condemns and who Jesus doesn't speak a word of condemnation to. Read carefully, and it is always the self-righteous, the religious insiders, the people of power and status, or the people who think that they are the chosen -- these are the people who receive Jesus' harshest words, or are judged in Jesus' parables.

Jesus didn't necessarily condone every choice made by the tax collectors, the prostitutes, people afflicted by evil spirits; or people like the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syrophenician woman, the Centurion, the woman caught in adultery -- they weren't all perfect people. But Jesus issued no word of condemnation, except to people who presumed to be gatekeepers to God's kingdom.

We all need transformation, and we must walk this road together.

CONCLUSION

This afternoon the Goessel Community Thanksgiving meal will take place at the elementary school. The meal will be in-person for the first time since the start of the pandemic.

It is a nice coincidence that we're talking about the Great Banquet when this meal is happening just a few hours from now. No one will be turned away from this meal. The meal is free; there is no price to enter (though we do take donations). The purpose is not simply to serve as a fundraiser, but also to provide a thanksgiving meal to any family of the community.

This is similar to how Jesus describes the Messianic banquet. At the Messianic banquet, the first will be last and the last will be first. At the Messianic banquet, the invitation is extended to everyone, even the outcasts and those on the outside.

All who are willing to accept the invitation and to commit to following Jesus. All who do not consider themselves worthier than the other invitees.

We must decide how we will respond to this invitation. Do we go? Or do we make excuses? What excuses do we make for not making a firm commitment to dedicate our lives to Christ? The excuses we give often reveal what we give most importance to in our lives.

None of us are perfect, but let us resolve today to hear the invitation and to show up. Our discipleship is to likewise extend the invitation, even when it is socially costly. To extend the invitation to the banquet to include all people.

This is the scandalous gospel.