

Come to the banquet by David Foster

Last week we looked at Matthew 18 where Jesus challenged us, as his followers, to be humble, whether it means being childlike or like a servant. Today we will be reminded to show humility by associating with people of low position. As we read in Romans 12:16, “*Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.*” (ESV) In a similar way, Jesus told a Pharisee to invite the poor and handicapped people to eat in his home. Christ said these things while eating a meal at the Pharisee's home. During the meal, where others were also invited, he told the host:

“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:12-14)

It was common practice in the first century for a prominent person, like the Pharisee in this story, to ask friends, relatives or rich neighbors for a large meal. Etiquette dictated that guests include the host on their invitation list if they were to have a similar feast. So what is the end result? Christ's point is: your guests repay you the favour. But if our real desire is to please God, we ought to invite those outside our normal circle of friendship, in particular the poor and the handicapped.

True hospitality involves inviting people outside our social circle, our comfort zone. This shouldn't surprise us considering that “hospitality” in the Greek language literally means “love of strangers”. Think a moment what's involved with having people over who you're barely acquainted with. They might even be poor or from a different ethnic background. This kind of situation certainly stretches us out of our comfort zone! For this very reason, the Bible says, “*Offer hospitality to one another **without grumbling.***” (1 Peter 4:9, NIV, bold font added) Is it burdensome or inconvenient to have friends over? Hardly. But certainly more effort is required to make conversation with people you don't know.

Just look around and see the kind of world we've inherited with the millions of people scattered and displaced from their homes, seeking refuge. Germany, for example, took in over a million refugees from the Middle East a couple years ago, and then also Canada welcomed 50,000. In addition, we already have tens of thousands of foreign students as well as immigrants living here from around the world. In fact, visible minorities make up well over half the population in most of our cities.

Clearly, our world is in need of hospitality, including our own country of Canada. Given this scenario what can be done? As you and I go through our daily routines of life, rubbing shoulders with various kinds of people, what mindset do we have? Are we wary of strangers? Or suspicious of Middle Eastern people? When we see someone dressed like a Muslim do we suspect they are sympathetic to terrorists? On the other hand, do we purposely show love by smiling and looking for a chance to say a kind word? Are we alert to the Spirit's prompting if we get a knock at the door?

This happened quite literally to Jane in a parking lot where she had done her shopping and was about to drive home. Suddenly, there was a knock on her car window. A lady dressed in a different outfit was struggling as she asked in broken English, “How can I get to Southdale Road?” Jane pointed to the bus stop which goes in that direction. But then, noticing the woman had several grocery bags, Jane realized she couldn't just drive away. God was asking something more! So she said, “Can I take you there?” The refugee climbed into the car, deeply grateful.

Upon arriving at the house, the poor lady asked Jane to come inside for a coffee. After spending 3/4 of an hour getting acquainted, they exchanged phone numbers. From then on Jane and Aysha were friends. They phoned and visited each other a couple times, and not infrequently, shared coffee or a meal. In

December, Jane invited Aysha's whole family to her home for a festive Christmas dinner.

I've heard countless similar stories. Let me share another example, involving a Christian couple, Rick and Rhoda, who met two Yazidi women that attended an ESL centre operating from a rented space in church which I normally attend. From time to time, several of our church members bring light snacks during the lunch period to share with newcomer-English-students while also engaging them in simple conversation. These two women had tragically lost their husbands in fighting back in their homeland of Iraq! As the friendship grew it was natural for Rick and Rhoda to visit in the homes of these traumatized widows where they were introduced to various other members of the extended family members. In due course, one brother named Ismail became a close friend. Incidentally, do you recall James 1:27, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God our Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.”* (ESV)

A few weeks later, Ismail invited them to an important religious festival in London attended by 400 Yazidis. The friendship between Rick and Ismail became very close. One day Ismail suggested Rick bring a Christian friend with him which explains how Cathy and I were included in this circle of friendship. We've been able to give Ismail and his relatives a number of good quality used clothes and several items of small furniture.

Let us continue our reading in Luke 14 and see if anyone responded to Christ's radical teaching about hospitality. As thought provoking and challenging as it was, no one opposed him. In fact, something Jesus said brought to mind the imagery of a heavenly banquet as taught in the Old Testament Scripture. Aware of this Scripture, a fellow guest at the meal, responded to Christ's remarks by exclaiming, *“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”*

Let us take a closer look at this special feast provided by God himself as found in Isaiah 25:6-9;
In Jerusalem the Lord ... will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear well aged wine and choice meat. There [i.e. Jerusalem] he will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears... The Lord has spoken! In that day the people will proclaim, “This is our God! We trusted in him, and he saved us! This is the Lord in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings.”

If we ask, “Do those sitting at this banquet have a wonderful, blessed experience?” Off course and the occasion is enhanced by the best food and drink. But what is the reason for this grand celebration? Death and sorrow have been eliminated and the guests are rejoicing at realizing God fulfilled his promise to save them! So when a fellow guest pronounced a blessing on the one who eats in this banquet, it prompted Jesus to tell a parable as recounted in verses 14 to 25;

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in,

so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”

Let's consider why Jesus told this story. Notice the master of the banquet is a kind-hearted man, mirroring the generosity Jesus talked about earlier. Like the previous hospitality, so also in this parable, the host invites the poor, crippled, blind and the lame. We already glimpsed one clue indicating that the host, in a sense, represents God. But there's another clue. Deuteronomy 10:18-19 tells us, *“God loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens,”* i.e. foreigners. Since God likes to provide food for people, don't you think it is fitting to view God as the “ideal” host? Indeed, it is heart-warming to see the extravagant generosity of the host, especially his compassion to the marginalized and the poor who lived on the outskirts of the city.

But what about the fact that this same host gets angry with the invited guests who make excuses not to come. And what about the way Jesus concludes the parable with a strong warning, saying those originally invited will not enjoy the banquet. How does one reconcile such anger with the gracious qualities highlighted earlier?

This apparent contradiction arises from a faulty assumption modern readers are prone to make by failing to understand the parable from a first century Near-Eastern perspective. Whenever a host issued invitations to attend a banquet at a great occasion like a wedding, he expected (and received) an initial reply, not unlike the RSVP in modern times. As the parable unfolds it is evident that those who were invited agreed to come. Then, as the event drew close, a number of people started to make excuses. The problem with these excuses was, these people made other things more important, thereby seriously dishonouring the host. So it is fitting that the parable ends with a warning against such unwarranted excuses.

Those who listened to this parable were Jews who took for granted their privileged status as God's chosen people. Most Jews claimed in a boastful way, “Abraham is our father” (i.e. ancestor, see John 8:39ff). So there is no doubt that they were on the original invitation list to God's banquet. But sadly, they didn't accept the invitation. Most Jews, though going through the outward motions of worship, did not worship God from the heart. Eventually, they even rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

Darrell Bock explains further in his commentary on Luke how grace and truth are interwoven in the parable, “It is crucial to understand that the party goes on despite the renegeing of the original invitees. The party is not postponed; others are invited to take their place. Opportunity has been lost by some, grace has been extended to others, but the meal is still served. The question is: on which side of the divide Jesus listeners ... fall. God's grace continues, but we can miss blessing if we do not respond to Jesus. Even those who seem to be first in line will miss the party if they refuse to come to the celebration.”

Two thousand years have passed since Jesus recounted this parable to a Jewish audience. So how will you and I respond? Will we accept God's invitation? Can we know if we'll make it into the heavenly banquet to share in this blessing?

First, let me ask, “Do you really understand what Isaiah meant by describing the heavenly banquet in terms of God abolishing death and wiping away all tears? This prophecy describes the Messiah's greatest achievement: bringing God's salvation to earth. (Isaiah 49:6) He did this on a physical level by healing terminally ill people and saving them from death. Not only so, he brought spiritual salvation into the home of a notorious sinner, called Zacchaeus. And, finally, Jesus died on the cross as the spotless Lamb of God, taking away sin and rising from the dead triumphantly on the third day. Interestingly, Jesus agreed with Isaiah when he pinpointed Jerusalem as the place where death will be

destroyed.

Jesus told his disciples, “We are going up to **Jerusalem**, where all the predictions of the prophets concerning the Son of Man will come true. He will be handed over to the Romans and he will be mocked, treated shamefully and spit upon. They will flog him with a whip and kill him, but on the third day he will rise again.” But they didn't understand any of this. The significance of his words was hidden from them and they failed to grasp what he was talking about. (Luke 18:31-34, bold added for emphasis)

It is so easy for us not to appreciate how fortunate we are, being able to view Christ's death and resurrection in hindsight. Consider, for example, this Scripture penned some 30 years after Jesus died. Notice how it sheds light and clears the fog showing what Jesus accomplished at the cross. “And now he has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.” (2 Timothy 1:10) (Other translations say Jesus “abolished” death.) And so, since Jesus destroyed death he has the authority to declare, “I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.” (Revelation 1:17-18)

Now that we have gained a fuller understanding of this parable, how does Jesus expect us to respond? First let's accept the invitation to the free banquet God offers. This means believing in the Lord Jesus as personal Saviour. Secondly, bearing in mind we are servants we ought to obey our master who instructs us to take his invitation to wider circles of people, whether newcomers marginalized in cities across Canada or even unreached people in remote places around the world.

As we think of sharing the Good News of salvation, it is fitting to begin with a tangible act of kindness, like giving a poor person something they need, such as food, clothing etc. This is in keeping with Christ's remarks on hospitality which serve as a prelude to the parable.

A number of years ago in Durban, someone heard that I had befriended many refugees so he gave me half a ton of food which I distributed to families from various countries, such as Congo, Rwanda, Uganda and Malawi. What an eye-opening experience this was for me to go inside several homes for the first time. One man who welcomed me in his home to meet his wife and 8 children, I'll call Mohammed. I affirmed God's love for him and assured him we were praying for his family. Given this circumstance, it was as natural as putting butter on bread for me to read Deuteronomy 10:18, “*God loves foreigners and feeds them.*” I simply saw myself as the Lord's servant conveying this gift of food. The credit belonged to God as Matthew 5:16 says, “*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*”

In several of these homes which I later re-visited, I felt prompted to read the parable of the banquet. Some of these families were Muslims. They were intrigued by Jesus' teaching, especially when I showed how the parable connects with earlier prophets who pictured God as hosting a banquet. I wasn't surprised, considering the Qur'an teaches that Allah will provide sumptuous food and drink in Jannat (Paradise) [Surah 44:55-57]. The similarities between the Bible and Qur'an are evident on closer examination, for example, both books teach that there is no death or tears in heaven (Paradise) [compare Isaiah 25:7 where death is forever destroyed as well as Revelation 21:1-4 and Surah 39:61] I also shared Ecclesiastes 3:11 with my refugee friends which correlates with the death being removed forever. Solomon wisely observed, *For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die ... God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, yet even so people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.* (cf. 7:1-4)

I realized, however, that no matter how many similarities I might enjoy using as stepping stones on a journey of friendship, there must come a time when I shared the fuller truth with Mohammed. Only by doing this could I be a genuine friend. Mohammed was a devote Muslim and I knew he did not believe Jesus died on the cross. Yet here in Isaiah 25, was a passage describing a wonderful banquet provided

by God and this passage implicitly foretells the Messiah's triumphant resurrection from the grave. Would I take this opportunity to show him reasons for my faith? We read through these verses and I carefully explained how they foretold the Messiah (Al Masih in the Qur'an). Unfortunately, he didn't accept what I told him although I do think he knew I made a real effort to address this sensitive topic because I honour God's Word which says, "*Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.*" (Proverbs 27:6, NIV)

I want to conclude with one more story, but it's quite different as it does not look just outward at reaching beyond the church through hospitality. It views hospitality from within the family of God. Some years ago my wife and I noticed that occasionally people would visit our church. We thought it would be lovely to connect more meaningfully by inviting them home for lunch. So we deliberately cooked a larger meal on Sundays, anticipating that we might meet someone at church we didn't know who we could invite over. This proved to be a very special time of getting acquainted and building relationships with people who we would not otherwise have bonded with. We heard later from some of them how much this meant. In fact, it was a key reason why they felt at home and decided to continue coming to our church.

Hospitality is one of those topics all of us can relate to, particularly those who came from elsewhere to settle in Canada.

- 1) Describe how hospitality is practised in your "home" culture.
- 2) I realize most of you were born outside Canada. So it will be interesting for me to hear some examples of how you experienced hospitality after coming here.
- 3) Can you share an experience where you went of your comfort zone and showed hospitality?

Appendix: Maintaining the personal touch

One of Christ's well known sayings goes like this: 'Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, ...' Then the righteous will answer him saying, 'Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? Or when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and cloth you?' ... And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:34-40, ESV)

What strikes me is the personal touch in these verses. They have a different ring about them than the arms length relationship often seen in modern day charitable giving. Many contemporary charitable donors give money or clothing to underprivileged people via organizations like Salvation Army or Goodwill. I'm not criticizing these organizations as inherently wrong or flawed. I'm simply saying: such arms length relations between donors and recipients lack the personal touch implied in Jesus statement, "I was a stranger and you invited me into your home." (Matthew 25:35, NLT)