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PARTY TIME  
Luke 14:15-24

People have some very unusual ideas about how to have a good time. We know this by the kinds of parties that we see them having. For instance, in Spain every year they have the annual La Tomatina Tomato Throwing Party. The centerpiece of this event in which they have what amounts to a gigantic food fight, throwing 100 tons of over ripe tomatoes at each other in the space of an hour. Afterward they wash everyone down with fire hoses.

In Austin, Texas every year they have a big party called Spamarama. It is held in honor of Spam! They have a spam cookoff, a spamburger eating contest and the spamalypics. The most unusual though may go to Pocahontas County, West Virginia, where every September they have the big Roadkill Cookoff. Yes, it is exactly what it sounds like. It features such enticing dishes as Rigormortis Bear Stew and Thumper Meets Bumper. They even crown a girl the “Roadkill Queen.” Now there’s something any young woman would aspire to. Only in West Virginia.

Today we’re going to talk about a party, but one that is very different from any of those. This part will be the best party ever. It will be a party that anyone and everyone would want to attend. We’ll learn about it in Luke 14:15-24. In that passage Jesus tells a story about a party. The lesson we learn from it is crucial.

THE PARTY LOOKED LIKE A BUST

The context of this Jesus tale is important. Luke 14:1 says, “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.” Once again Jesus was invited to the home of a religious leader not to encourage him but to examine him and find out what was wrong about him.

A couple of important things happen at this meal. First Jesus heals a man and runs into the Pharisees’ disapproval of healing on the Sabbath. He then shows them what’s wrong with their thinking. Next he observes the jockeying for position at the table, which was all about pride. After commenting on that Jesus told the host that rather than associating with the elite and the respectable he should reach out to the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who have no status in society. Those who do that will be repaid, he said, at the resurrection.

At this point we can only guess at what was happening in that room, but I think we can have a pretty good idea. I suspect there was tension. Jesus has skewered the wrong thinking of his host and his host's friends and he has shined a light on their petty pride. In no uncertain terms he has told them they have a pride problem. I suspect many in the room were insulted. The situation was awkward and at least some people were looking for a way to lessen the tension. When Jesus mentioned being rewarded at the resurrection one man picked up on that idea. He figured he could say something everyone would agree with and hopefully get the party back onto a safer track. He said, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (verse 15).

In Isaiah 25:6 the prophet wrote of a day when God would act to defeat his enemies and rescue his people. At that time, Isaiah said, "The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, the best of meats and the finest of wines." All Jews knew that prophecy and understood it to be a time when God's kingdom finally came on earth. At that point there would be this amazing feast. This man, picking up on Jesus' mention of the resurrection, referred to that feast and said, "won't that be a great day. Anyone who is there will truly be blessed." He wanted to get off the confrontation track and onto a track that everyone could agree on. It didn't work.

Jesus essentially said, "Yes, let's talk about that feast" and proceeded to tell a story about a man giving a feast, a not very veiled reference to the very feast the man referred to. This rich man gives a feast. Note that Luke tells us that it was a "great" feast. Not just a feast, not just a good feast, but a great one. The Greek word for "great" is mega. It literally was a mega feast. This was going to be a real blowout. This was the party of the year.

In that day they sent out invitations to prospective guests just as we do today. However back then the invitations would probably have been not written but a verbal invitation delivered by a servant. "You are invited to a megafeast at the home of the master on the 24<sup>th</sup> of next month." People would then respond, indicating that they would or would not be able to attend.

In those days people were not driven by the clock as we are. Laurie and I have encountered different kinds of people. We once went to a funeral for a neighbor who was from a Hispanic culture that had an interesting approach to time. We felt a little stressed because we got there late. We immediately wondered if we had gotten the date wrong because there was no one there. The casket was there along with some flowers, but no people. It was a good half hour before a few people

began trickling in. Slowly the room filled up and the service finally got started almost an hour late. That particular culture had a very lax attitude toward punctuality, obviously. On the other extreme we knew a person from Switzerland who could hardly contain herself if an event started 3 minutes late.

In first century Israel no one had cell phones, watches, or even clocks. So if you said an event started at 4:30 P. M. it would mean nothing. People might show up anywhere from 3 to 6. This was also complicated by the difficulty of preparing a meal. If they were going to serve lamb at the meal, somebody had to go out and kill the lamb, then dress it. Then it had to be cooked over an open fire. Having an exact time would have been something of a problem. So hosts would tell those invited the day of the feast. The guests would know that when all the preparations had been completed that day the host would send someone to fetch them, telling them that all was prepared. You see this in verse 17. “At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’”

A shocking thing happens in verse 18. All of the invited guests beg off. Literally the text says “as one” they began to decline. This is seriously rude. These people have already accepted the invitation, telling the host they would come. He has planned on them attending. He has killed the fattened calf and prepared a sumptuous meal. But now at the last minute every single guest backs out.

The excuses the guests use are the definition of lame. The first man says he has bought a field and he has to go look it over. Sure, that makes sense. If I buy a house I don’t look it over before I make an offer. I wait until I’ve signed the documents and paid the money before I go see what I bought and make sure it’s in good condition. That’s absurd. When we bought our house we spent many weeks looking for a house. And we examined the house thoroughly before we agreed to buy it. We went through and noted things that needed to be fixed before we would sign the papers. Who buys real estate sight unseen? No one.

The second man has bought some oxen and he has to go inspect them. Right. Again, if I buy a truck would I pay for it without ever seeing it and only inspect it after I’ve paid for it? That’s just ludicrous. The last excuse is the lamest of all. This guy says he can’t come because he just got married. Was this a surprise? You didn’t know when you accepted the invitation that you were going to get married? And your wife hates to go to parties, right? She hates going to a dinner, eating the finest of food and visiting with friends. She’d much rather stay home and watch television.

Every person listening to Jesus knew precisely what feast he was talking about. It is God's great feast in his kingdom. Jesus has just said that the people invited, meaning the Jewish people listening to Jesus, had rejected God's invitation to the feast and they had done so for lame reasons. Jesus knew the religious elite were rejecting him and would lead the nation away from him. Paul alluded to this in Romans 10:2-3. Speaking of his fellow Jewish people he said, "I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." All those people, by their rejection of Jesus, had said "no thanks" to God's invitation to the feast.

#### THE HOST GOT A SAVE

My son, Toby, though he grew up here in the San Diego area, has played hockey since he was 8 years old. He still plays every week. He is a goalie. I think he did that to get back at his parents. He picked the most expensive position in one of the most expensive sports you can play. Do you have any idea how much goalie equipment costs? Goalie skates are reinforced and padded to protect his feet from that hard puck being fired at him at up to 90 miles per hour. Those skates run about \$400. Then he needs leg pads. We'll put those at \$1200. You'd better have good, super padded pants, which come in at around \$350. Then you need chest and arm protector. That's a cool \$500. So it goes. The total comes to around \$3750. Hey, good luck Anna. He's yours now.

A good goalie is worth his weight in gold, and not just because of the cost of his equipment. A hockey team does everything it can to control the puck but will not do so throughout a game. Opposing players will get shots on the net. I've seen games where Toby faced close to 50 shots. Every one of those shots would go into the goal unless the goalie stopped them. He's the last and most important line of defense. When he stops a shot they call it a save. He has saved the day. Without him it would have been a disaster for the team. In his story the party that Jesus described was about to be a disaster. The decorations have been put out. The calf has been killed, the food has been prepared, the tables have been set, and no one is coming! The food is ready to be served. The host has gone to all that trouble, the money has been spent, all for nothing. The host was unwilling to have his efforts go to waste. He decides he's going to have a party, no matter what. So he makes a save. He saves the party from being a total loss. He comes up with an idea that will avert the looming disaster.

The master tells the servant to go into the town and collect people off the streets. Who is he going to find there? The homeless guy sitting on the corner with his

cardboard sign that says, “Homeless vet. Please help.” The disabled people, the blind, who in that society could not work and were totally dependent on the charity of others, who spent their days begging, would be there. They would be invited. All the “acceptable” people in town had been invited and every single one had backed out at the last second. All that is left are the “dregs” of society. These are all the people who were not invited in the first place because their presence was not desired in polite society. They were the people that the influential people would have nothing to do with and no interest in whatsoever. Those were the people the servant collected from the streets and brought to the party.

The servant did that, but even after he had found all the outcasts he could there was still room in the banquet hall. There were still going to be empty seats at the tables and an awful lot of food leftover. So the master told the servant, “expand the search.” He literally told him to go search the hedges, in other words, to go beat the bushes. He told the servant literally to force people to come. You can understand why that might have required. These people were not used to being invited to fancy high society parties. Many of them would have been the dregs of society, the so-called “sinners” who were shunned and scorned by the acceptable people like the master of the feast. These people would not have been anxious to go to a place they knew they were not wanted and where they would face ostracism. The servant was instructed to tell them not to worry about any of that and to drag them into the banquet if necessary.

In his book, *The Parables of Grace* (p. 133), Robert Capon wrote, “These are the poor and handicapped. They don’t drive BMW’s, they don’t own Dior gowns, and they don’t tear open their mail in breathless anticipation of yet another gala...they don’t get invited anywhere for one simple reason: they are a disgrace to polite, successful society.”

Some people think the first group of no accounts were the common people of Israel and the second group referred to the Gentiles. That’s making the mistake of over interpreting a parable. Remember this is an illustration intended to make one main point. We must not make everything in the story a symbol. That’s not the point. Jesus tells us what the point of this story is in verse 24. In verse 23 he was still telling the story. He was quoting what the master said to his servant. The verb indicates it was singular, “you (singular) go out to the roads.” But in verse 24 the story is over. Jesus is summing up the meaning. He turns to the group at the meal that evening as says, “For I tell you (plural)...” He is now explaining the point, the plural tells us he is speaking to the crowd. And the point of the story is “not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”

Who is Jesus talking about? He means the people right there at the table with him. They thought they had God's invitation to his great feast in his kingdom because, after all, they were his chosen people. They kept his Law. Like the guy whose comment sparked this story from Jesus, they were sure that because they were better than other people they had a gold plated invitation to God's great feast. Talk about an awkward moment. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being cozy and comfy and 10 being total embarrassment and unpleasantness, this was a 20. Jesus has just looked at some of the most respected, the most religious, the most influential, the most pious individuals among God's chosen people and said, "Yeah, about that great feast that you are so looking forward to, none of you will be there." In effect, he's just told them they're all going to hell.

Verse 25 begins, "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus." That means there is a scene change. The account of the dinner at the Pharisee's house ends abruptly at verse 24. It's not too hard to figure why. That little story and its meaning brought things to a screeching halt. What do you say when somebody has just told you that what all your religious fervor and piety have gotten you is a one way ticket out of God's kingdom? In John 3:18 speaking of himself as the Son of God Jesus said, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." John 3:36 says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." These people were rejecting Jesus and so in no uncertain words Jesus told them they were going to be condemned.

## IMPLICATIONS

### THE KINGDOM IS A PARTY

The given in this story is that there is going to be a feast when God's kingdom comes. The man quoted in verse 15 knew that from Isaiah 25:6. Jesus did not correct his belief that there will be such a feast. Revelation 19:9 confirms it when it says, "Then the angel said to me, 'Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'"

Fine, so there's a feast. So what? We need to reflect on what a feast meant back in that day. There's something of a disconnect for us due to a big cultural factor. That factor is that we live in an entertainment oriented and saturated culture. What would you say is the most fun thing you can do? What do you enjoy more than anything else? We have an astounding array of entertainment options. You can go to the beach and surf, stand-up paddle, kayak, go snorkeling or even scuba diving.

But maybe the beach isn't your thing. You can go to movies. Or you can go to concerts. Do you know how many concerts there will be in San Diego this year? I don't either, but it's a lot. There are plays to attend, or you can stay home and watch television. You may get 200 or 300 channels on your TV all broadcasting 24 hours a day, which means that you can be entertained at 3 in the morning. Although the few times in my life I've been sick and unable to sleep and tried to watch television that time of night I've been astounded at how you can have that many channels all broadcasting absolute dreck at the same time.

There are tons of other options like golf, tennis. Maybe you like attending sports events like Padres or Chargers games because you are a masochist and love the pain of watching them lose continually. In our family one of the big winners for entertainment is Disney. Laurie and I apparently infected our children with a passion for Disney parks. You name it, Disneyland, California Adventure, Animal Kingdom and Hollywood Studios in Florida, they love them all.

How many of those options were available to people in ancient Israel? There were no amusement parks. There was no Major League baseball or NFL. There was no Disney, no golf, no tennis, no television, no concerts, no plays, no movies, no surfing, no snorkeling. Their entertainment options were seriously limited. What was the most fun they could have? They could have a day where they took a break from work, got together and had a feast. In their minds there was nothing better. They looked forward with great anticipation to a feast with great food, which was very hard to come by, and a chance to just enjoy being together.

Remember that life was awfully demanding for people in those days. It was hard work, a constant struggle, a battle to scrape together enough food to eat. That battle went on pretty much day after day. In Israel the only relief from it was the Sabbath, with the exception of a big feast. When a feast came everyone got to take the day off. They got to relax, to eat to their full, which often did not happen, and to just have fun. It was the best they knew.

What do you envision when you think of being in God's kingdom? How do you envision that? I've heard people describe being in God's kingdom as a time when we are all continually singing and worshipping God. It will be like an eternal worship service. I've got to be honest with you. I like church. After all, it is my job. But come on, a never ending worship service? Maybe I'm showing my cards here, but that doesn't float my boat.

Other people have this image of us as sort of disembodied spirits floating around somewhere doing who knows what, or maybe having wings, sitting around on clouds playing harps. Yawn. By the way, those are very unbiblical views of God's eternal kingdom. Why do you think God chose to symbolize what we would experience in his kingdom by a feast? Is it literally that the thing starts off with a banquet with really good food? There's some cool parts of that. You can have all the French fries, all the apple pie, all the gooey chocolate desserts you want, you can eat as much of the no-no foods as you could ever desire because it won't hurt you. I'd love to have all the jelly doughnuts I can eat.

Perhaps there will be food in the kingdom. Jesus talked about not partaking of the Lord's Supper again until he did it anew with us in his kingdom. But I don't think that's really the point. I think the point is that a feast was the most fun people could imagine having, and that's what we are going to experience in God's kingdom. What a holiday feast should be, a time of celebration, love, togetherness, joy and just downright enjoyment is what we will experience there.

There are times in this life when you are touched in a way that it is impossible to express. We have experienced several of those in our family the past few years. Two years ago Laurie and I got to fulfill a long time dream and go on a vacation with our two grown children to Disney World in Florida. We had more fun than anyone ought to have. It was a blast. I recall one warm Florida evening when we were at the Magic Kingdom park. We stopped along Main Street to get some funnel cakes that were delicious. As we were eating them the Main Street Electrical Parade came by. We hadn't seen that since our kids were little. It took us back to those wonderful days. It was a nostalgic, magical joyful and fun moment. Then last year Anna and Toby got married. Their wedding was a joyous and fun celebration. In February Carissa and Michael had a beautiful wedding down at Coronado. Once again we had so much fun we wanted it to last.

But suddenly it is over. You have the memories and the pictures and they can get you in touch with what you felt to a degree, but that beautiful moment is gone and will never come back, leaving you with just that lingering sense of how wonderful it was. As great as those times were, life goes on. Hard things happen. Michael is now in a war zone in Afghanistan. That's how life is. There are these precious moments that you want to last, but they don't last. They end and are usually followed by lulls and low points. In the kingdom of God you will be able to grab onto those precious moments, the whole thing will be like that and it will not pass into memory. It will be constant joy. It will be the thing that you've had the briefest hints and tastes of, moments all too fleeting, but they will finally be yours



fully in that kingdom and they won't end. They won't end ever. That is why God has pictured his kingdom as being like a feast. The best you know right now will pale in comparison to what we will experience in God's kingdom.

### IT IS NUTS TO TRADE IN THE KINGDOM

This is another place where Jesus used humor in his teaching. The lesson of this parable is as serious as brain surgery, but in the process he employed some humor to get the point across. His listeners would have gotten at least a chuckle out of the excuses the invited guests offered up in his story. There was probably considerable tsk-tsking and shaking of heads as well. Can you imagine saying yes to an invitation and then begging off because you bought a piece of property? Is the land not going to be there tomorrow? Would anyone miss out on the party of the year because he bought a truck without ever seeing it? And would you have to miss the great party because you had a sudden unexpected wedding to a wife who never wants to go to parties?

The excuses are *ludicrous*. Jesus intended them that way. He wanted his audience, including us, to be struck with how stupid these people's choices were. I was talking to my brother recently while he was here after the birth of his first grandson. At one point we were talking about dumb choices we've made in our lives. I was able to needle him about the fact that while he was in college he owned a beautiful blue 1966 Mustang. After college he sold it and bought...a Ford Pinto. Yep, that's right. A Pinto, the car named by *Time* magazine as on the list of the 50 worst cars of all time, the car whose gas tank tended to erupt in flames if the vehicle was rear-ended. Oh, yeah, that was a great trade. Who would want a super cool Mustang when you could have a Pinto with an exploding gas tank? Jerry did. Good choice, don't you think?

That decision of Jerry's was the pinnacle of wisdom compared to trading the kingdom of God for anything. Yet the people at that dinner with Jesus were doing just that. I will point out shortly what they were trading it for, but I will tell you they were making a bad deal. Today the world is full of people trading in the kingdom of God for some bauble that is worthless. If you are making that trade, stop. If you are selling out for money, for status, for approval, for acceptance, for position, for success, for momentary pleasure, that is an idiotic deal. Stop, put your faith in Jesus and let him be the Master of your life and your heart.

If you've done that I want to draw your attention back to the incredible gift of the kingdom of God. When we live with the reality of it we will get comfort and peace in the face of the threats of this world and we will get perspective on how we

should live our lives. Never, ever forget the value of this gift and never compromise it for some bauble.

### THE PARTY IS FOR OUTCASTS

Remember the context of this story, because it is crucial. The people at the Pharisee's dinner party thought they had the God thing wired because they had their rules and kept them. When a suffering man was brought to Jesus at that Sabbath dinner all they could think about was the rules about the Sabbath. No work on the Sabbath. Healing is work. Sorry, can't help you today, dude. They had a proud, judgmental attitude when Jesus healed the man and reminded them that compassion is always right.

Jesus then pointed out the petty jockeying for position at the dinner. He could see the overweening pride that caused people to be hypersensitive to seating order. It's that same pride that causes people to make a big deal about size of the office, proximity at the conference table to the boss, and every other stupid status symbol we fixate on.

Then he went on to zero in on the fact that people have a tendency to rub shoulders only with those who have status. He instructed his fellow diners to care about the down and outers. The common denominator in all those incidents was pride. And more than anything else it was pride that they were trading the kingdom of God for. They refused to say, "You are right, Jesus, and we are wrong. We need to understand what God really wants of us and we've missed the point." They refused to even entertain the possibility that Jesus might be right and might be who he said he was because if they did so it totally obliterated their own position and power. The point is they would rather have their place of pride and power in their society than they would humble themselves and bow at the feet of Jesus. In other words, given the choice between humbling themselves and getting the kingdom of God on one hand and maintaining their pride but losing the kingdom on the other, they chose their pride! The main point of this story by Jesus is that his contemporaries were making a terrible deal in trading the kingdom of God for their own pride.

We can get so caught up in our pride. When our kids were young we read them a series of books featuring Hank the Cowdog. Hank tells the stories. He fancies himself the "head of ranch security." But it becomes apparent that he is no such thing in the stories. Laurie and I took care of Anna and Toby's dogs, Banjo and Doc, yesterday. Banjo reminds me of Hank. He prowls around the perimeter as though protecting us from any dangerous invaders. Last night he went into the kitchen and began barking. He was protecting us from a terror he encountered

there. It was the coffee maker. So often we are like Hank and Banjo. We have an overinflated sense of our own importance. We think we are doing some big important thing, when in fact it is just not true. Our pride so easily gets puffed up.

Observe who gets into the feast that is God's kingdom. It is the blind, the lame, the cripples, the poor, the no-accounts. Robert Capon says (p. 133), "the reason for dragging the refuse of humanity into the party is not pity for its plight or admiration for its lowliness but simply the fact that this idiot of a host has decided he has to have a full house. Grace...is not depicted here as a response...rather it is shown as a crazy initiative...(p. 136) all you have to be is a certified loser and God will send his servant Jesus to positively drag you into his house...Salvation offered on any other basis is bad news, not Gospel. We are raised, reconciled and restored not because we are thrifty, brave, clean and reverent but because we are dead and our life is hid with Christ."

Ephesians 2:5 says because of his great love for us God "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." We were dead, and God sent his servant Jesus to drag our undeserving carcasses into the feast. Do you ever feel hopeless, as though all you deserve is God's disdain, disapproval and rejection? Do you ever feel like you don't measure up and there's not hope that you ever will? Congratulations. You just qualified for God's great party. Jesus began his greatest sermon with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom belongs to those who see that they are hopeless and are weary, who have no hope save for his mercy in Jesus.

Do you find yourself striving mightily to somehow get there, to somehow make yourself better so that maybe God will finally smile upon you? If so know immediately that you are trying to drive to Seattle by going south on I-5. Turn around immediately. All you are doing is getting farther from God and his kingdom. God's kingdom is for wounded, flawed, imperfect, limping people who are celebrating that they've been included through God's grace. We can drop the act, be done with the crusade to show how capable, smart, good, godly or religious we are. We no longer have to be obsessed with how we look or what others think of us. We no longer need be offended because someone didn't notice us or feel like we must always defend ourselves. And we can accept the other outcasts around us in the kingdom because they are just like us.

Tony Campolo is a somewhat controversial Christian sociology professor. In one of his books he tells the story of being awake and hungry at 3:30 in the morning in

Honolulu due to jet lag. He went out looking for something to eat and ended up at a greasy diner. As he was eating a group of prostitutes entered. He overheard one of them mention it was her birthday the next day. One of her colleagues said, “so what, what am I supposed to do? Throw you a party?” The woman responded that no one had ever thrown her a birthday party. That gave Campolo an idea. He found out from the diner’s owner, Harry, that the woman came in pretty much every night. So Tony said, “why don’t we give her a birthday party?” The diner owner thought that was a great idea so that’s what they did. When Harry found out that Tony was a Christian he said, “what kind of church do you belong to?” Campolo said, “A church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.” Harry was surprised, but then said, “No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join it.”

That’s the Kingdom of God. It is the place where there is no place for pride, but lots of room for the outcasts who have been dragged in off the street by God’s amazing grace.