

A Wide Invitation  
Sermon 183 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 7, 2023  
Luke 14:15-24

One day a man said to God, “God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like.”

God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of vegetable stew. It smelled delicious and made the man’s mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, “You have seen Hell.”

Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful vegetable stew that made the man’s mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well-nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The man said, “I don’t understand.”

God smiled. It is simple, God said, Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy [others] think only of themselves...<sup>1</sup>

Now, I can’t say for sure if this is a literal description or something more akin to a parable that sort of “points toward” or “gets at” what we will find at our eternal destination; but what I can say is that there does seem to be something unmistakably spiritual about the tables we gather around.

Miguel, from the video we watched just a moment ago seems to know it too. Did you catch what he said in his clip?

“If you really want to learn about other people, other cultures, then sit down and share a meal with them because when people are eating, they literally open their hearts. When you feed the culturally appropriate food, you are feeding not just stomachs, but hearts and souls too... the more you open the space at the table, the more the blessing is.”

Today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel - the Parable of the Great Banquet - seems to point us in the same direction ...there’s just something spiritual about the table.

There is a robust conversation among scholars and interpreters of the Bible about whether this parable (the one in Luke’s Gospel) is about a heavenly banquet or an earthly banquet.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sofoarchon.com/heaven-and-hell-the-parable-of-the-long-spoons/>

Is it an image of God's eternal table or is Jesus giving instructions for the more common tables that we convene every day? After spending some time reviewing the research, I'm increasingly convinced that it is both, with a little more emphasis on the latter.

You see the parable begins - as parables so often do - with a statement from someone who happens to be standing near Jesus. "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God," says a friend, as Jesus gathers around the Sabbath table with a group of Pharisees.

The rest of the group is quiet but Jesus responds: "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many..."

But all the guests who had first RSVP'd "yes" suddenly had things come up to keep them away. One says he just purchased some land and needs to go inspect it. Shouldn't he have done that before signing the purchase agreement? Another just bought some oxen and needs to go try them out. Again, shouldn't he have done that before the deal was done? Then the third just got married and therefore, is suddenly unable to attend. Do married people not attend dinner parties anymore?

Suddenly the host is humiliated or rather humbled (the difference between the two is ever so slight) when all of his preparations seem to be for naught. So he sends out his slave with a wider invitation than the one he may have issued before. But after the B-listers have taken their seats the host discovers that seats remain vacant, still.

So he sends out the slave again with an even wider invitation, this time moving from "bringing" in the neighbors to "compelling" them to come in. You can feel the desperation rising as the host will do anything to fill the seats, ensuring that his efforts have not been in vain. As the host doubles down on the commitment to fill the table, we can certainly see the parallels with the extravagant measures God is willing to undertake in order to fill the table, so to speak. The actions of the host are reminiscent of the incarnate God described in Philippians 2 who has no regard for status or propriety, a God who's self-emptying nature takes Jesus all the way to the cross, in order that every last part of creation might be loved, might be saved...

This host does not seem concerned with appearances as he fills his table with B-listers and C-listers. He really doesn't really dwell on the fact that the A-list friends have suddenly changed their minds. The only thing said about them is (did you catch it at the end there?) That they will miss out on the feast.

Sometimes, and especially in the evangelical traditions, our focus can be overly focused on God's invitation and our response. In that way, we might read this parable as a metaphor for our salvation, appropriating the kingdom table with Heaven, the host as God, and we the invited guests (either in groups A, B, or C). Our primary concern, in this reading, is our acceptance or rejection of the invitation.

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here, there is a place for that, that is important, but that is not the end.

Parables, like this one, always have many, many layers of interpretation. That is what makes them so powerful for spiritual growth and transformation.

What if, like so many other gifts from God, the table is a gift not just to receive, but also to steward? What if God invites us to the table (which could really describe any place where we experience God's love, God's grace, God's presence, God's abundance...),  
    maybe it is the communion table,  
    maybe it is a space in a friend's home,  
    maybe it is some other place altogether,  
but what if God invites us initially and gives us a glimpse of God's goodness... and from that moment on, we are stewards of that gift?

As followers of Jesus, we are called not just to receive the Good News of God's love but to share it widely. To become imitators of Christ (as Paul says to the Ephesians), to walk in love... to share it widely in the same way that it has been shared with us.

Then shouldn't we too be like the host in Luke's Gospel? Setting the banquet table, inviting the world to come and taste the bread of heaven that God has so graciously shared with us? Maybe this is where the parable is not so theoretical, but rather quite practical. When we throw a dinner party, when we prepare our banquet tables, in our homes but especially in our church, maybe we are to issue the invitation widely, and then if seats remain unfilled we should open the invitation a little wider the next time.

And if any seats remain unfilled, maybe we should examine our guest list and see if we have left anyone out either because of our own prejudice, or ignorance, or bias... or even by accident alone... as long as there is room, we should be inviting all people to come and enjoy the food that God has entrusted to our care. And friends, here is the best news of all... there is always another seat at this table. There is always room for one more.

All are welcome, for God's love does not discriminate. All are invited, there's plenty to eat. Maybe we just need to learn the lesson that Miguel said so easily, so plainly, so naturally and so wisely... When people are eating, they're literally opening their hearts... The more you open the space at the table, the more the blessing is.

So maybe it's both.

Maybe the tables we set and steward in this world reflect our vision and experience of God's eternal table. Maybe if we don't continue to widen our invitation... we will end up like the guests first invited, who later made excuses and decided not to come, ultimately missing out on the joy and abundance shared at the table.

Or maybe, just maybe, we could work to become more like the host, recognizing that we have already received so many good gifts from God and that now our task is to share them widely, to issue an ever-widening invitation to all the many tables we set and enjoy.

Not because we have it all figured out, but because God has invited us all. To come and receive together. To come and see together. To come and be made new together. To come and eat together. To come and share in the feast together.

Here and thereafter... Now and forever...

Amen.