

August 2, 2020

*"A Poor Excuse"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 14:15-24

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How many of you remember those Southwest Airline commercials with the tag line, "Wanna get away?" Wanna get away? The commercials were funny in that they always depicted a person making some serious blunder or mistake, and then becoming so embarrassed by what he or she had done, that they just wanted to get out of town as quickly as possible. Enter Southwest Airlines, with their low-priced "wanna get away" fares, and that wish could easily become a reality. Here are a couple examples of the commercials you might remember. One, a woman is a guest in somebody else's home, using the bathroom, when she decides to peek in and see what's inside the medicine cabinet. Well, of course in looking, she accidentally knocks down one of the glass shelves, and everything breaks and crashes down. Wanna get away? Another involves a couple who are obviously on a first date. They have a nice dinner and evening together, and he pulls up to her house to drop her off. She smiles and says "hope to see you again," and gets out. He sits there for a few seconds, and lets out a sigh that indicates he has just relieved himself of some gas. Suddenly, she opens the car door, sticks her head in and says, "I forgot my phone..." Wanna get away?

We chuckle at these scenarios, but the truth is, we've all been in situations like that to some degree. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time and wondering, "How did I ever get into this mess?" Or, we put our foot in our mouth, saying something embarrassing that we regret. Or, we espouse an opinion on something that we find out later was way off track. That's why those commercials resonate with us. And interestingly enough, that's what today's parable is really all about. Only this time, it's Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, who suffer the humiliation and probably "wanna get away." Let me set the scene that leads to this parable. Jesus has been invited to the home of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. But really, this is a trap. St. Luke tells us, "They were watching him closely." They actually bring in a man who's crippled to see if Jesus is going to break the law by "working," curing him, on the Sabbath. Which, by the way, Jesus does. And then Jesus talks to the Pharisees about some things that cut right to the core of their hypocrisy and thinking. About how the spirit of the law is much more important than the letter of the law. About those who exalt themselves eventually being humbled, but those who humble themselves, in due course, will be exalted. He goes on about being generous to those who cannot repay you. And I'm sure there was more, but you know how those gospel writers never give us enough information. So I can just imagine the atmosphere at that dinner party

becoming a little bit uncomfortable. So uncomfortable, that one of the dinner guests tries to diffuse the situation by making the statement, “What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God.” That's like saying, “Come on boys, let's everyone lighten up.”

But Jesus isn't quite finished with the Pharisees and their shenanigans. I can imagine him looking directly at the Pharisees, saying, “You know what? This dinner party that you're hosting isn't anything like the kind where I come from. Nothing like it at all.” Obviously, Jesus is talking about heaven. “No, where I come from there are a lot of humble folks, poor folks, and lonely folks, and hurting folks, and single moms, and recovering addicts, and white people and black people and people of all colors that come to the banquet. You might be surprised that there are even some gay folks there, too. You see, where I come from, everyone is invited to the feast. But for some reason, there seems to be very few of you prideful, self-righteous types. So I'm going to tell you a story.”

And then Jesus tells them today's parable. “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations.” In this parable the man giving the great feast is, of course, God. And he has invited many people... you and me among them... to come to his banquet, which symbolizes the kingdom of God – where we are fed and enjoy a deep, meaningful relationship with God. Now, before I go any further, just think – here's Jesus using a great feast and celebration as a symbol for life with God. You know, sometimes I think we have this notion that God doesn't want us to have any fun. But time and time again, Jesus tells us differently. He made it clear, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” That's a powerful promise. And just look at a few examples of how Jesus delivers on that promise. Like at a wedding in Cana, when they ran out of wine. Jesus took not one, not two, but six huge water pots, and turned the water into wine. Wine which was far superior to the original wine. Here's Jesus giving abundantly at a wedding – a celebration of love. Or when the prodigal son, or the lost daughter, the wayward child, finally comes home, and the father, God, throws a huge celebration, giving the lost one the best robe, a ring for his finger, sandals for his feet, a fatted calf was killed, and there was music and dancing. God giving abundantly when a sinner repents. And remember, when Jesus fed 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread – there were twelve full baskets of food left over. Jesus giving abundantly to those who truly trust in him. Yes, time and time again, the Kingdom of God, a relationship with God, is compared to a time and place of abundance, a celebration, a time and place of great joy and gladness, a dinner party. And doesn't this sound wonderful? Like someplace you'd like to be invited? I know I would!

So let's go back to the parable and see what lessons we can learn. The master has the banquet ready. But incredibly, some people come up with excuses not to attend. The first man says, "I bought a piece of land and I must go out and inspect it; please consider me excused." This man had to go make sure his land, his means of making a living, was in order. You see, his land was his security. And he felt it was more important for him to attend to that, than to accept God's invitation. In essence, he was saying to God, "I can't come to your banquet now, I've got to make a living. I've got to make sure I'm financially secure, and all my earthly needs are met." And this is understandable. We want to take care of our family. We want those good things in life. It's just that God calls us to put Him first. And Jesus gave us this divine promise: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you." In abundance. If you put your trust and security in God first, instead of saying, "please consider me excused."

Then there was the second man. He claimed, "I bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out; please consider me excused." In ancient times, for a man to afford five pairs of oxen, which is ten animals, was a sign of wealth and power. He was probably very self-sufficient. In essence he was saying, "I don't need God right now, I'm getting along quite well just the way I am." And don't we all feel this way sometimes? When things seem to be going smoothly, with no pressing issues at hand, we become comfortable, confident that we can handle everything on our own. And what happens? Well we become lax. Lax in our prayer life, lax in making the effort to be with God or read the Bible, lax in our church attendance. And then something goes south, and suddenly we become fearful, angry, depressed, not knowing what to do or where to turn. When all along Jesus was there saying, "I will take your burdens from you. I will give you rest. I will give you my peace that passes all understanding. Just come to me." But instead, we say, "please consider me excused."

Finally, we could be like the third man, who said, "I just married my wife, please consider me excused." On the surface, this may seem to us a noble reason. After all, with all the problems in marriage and at home, how can God not accept this excuse? But think a little deeper. What this man was really saying was, "I can't come because someone else is more important." Actually, what he should have said was, "If you don't mind, would it be okay to bring my wife to the banquet, as well." He used his family as an excuse for not accepting God's invitation. Like we do sometimes. You know, "God, I'll be there for you as soon as I get the kids raised because it's just too hectic here on Sunday mornings." Or, "I just need to get my elderly parents taken care of, then I'll be all set." Or even, "I want to let my kids be

independent and make their own decision about religion.” But this kind of thinking is deceptive. Because as you parents and grandparents know, the struggles and stresses of marriage and running a family can easily overwhelm us. And the very best thing we can do is actually bring our families together into the presence of God. Because then, families will be built on a foundation of love and forgiveness and working together. Children will be taught that God is more important than the culture, more important than sports, money, power, material possessions, or fame. They’ll learn that love for God and love and service for each other is the real purpose of living. Instead, however, we often use our families as the reason to say, “please consider me excused.”

Now in the parable, it’s interesting what happens next. To those who declined God’s invitation, he said, “none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my feast.” Instead, God brought in the poor, the lame, the blind, and so many others from the outskirts of town. People that represent those who have hearts of dependence, hearts of humility, hearts knowing their need for God and wanting to be in a close relationship with God. And think about it - aren't we poor and blind and lame in so many ways. So pause for a moment and imagine that kind of relationship with God. One that leads to a life where the questions, confusion and pressures of this earthly life are greatly reduced because you have God to guide your path and give you his wisdom and strength. Imagine a life where God's peace and calm prevails in your soul, even with all that is going on around us. Imagine a life where healing is found, where love and acceptance is felt. Imagine a life of abundance. And then imagine what happens next...imagine that heavenly, eternal life waiting for you, where all is made perfect and whole. Imagine being seated at a table with all the great saints. Imagine seeing the face of God in all His glory and honor. Imagine our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ saving a seat just for you.

And then imagine saying “No. Please consider me excused.” Amen.

### Prayer

O Lord, God, thank you for the invitation to be in a close and personal relationship with you, the God of all creation. We are awed and humbled when we think of your love that is unconditional, your grace that is truly amazing, your mercy that is patient and understanding, your blessings of abundance that you want to give to each one of us. Forgive us, Lord, when we give other things and other people priority over you in our life. Help us not make excuses. Help us step into the invitation of life with you. Life now and life forever. Thank you Lord. Amen.