

“Meeting Jesus at the Table: Excuses and Invitations”  
Luke 14:15-24

The best movies and novels for me are the ones that keep me guessing or have an unexpected twist in their plots where the “normal” expectations are reversed. Take for example the Disney movie Frozen where we would have normally expected a true act of love between two lovers, but the twist comes when we see the true act of love coming from a sister. The storyline is that of two sisters, Elsa and Anna, and their journey to overcome fear and rediscover the power of love. Elsa has a special power to turn things she touches into ice. She feared her own power and isolated herself, but her sister never gave up on her. She pursued her to bring her back to their home and to their kingdom. In the pursuit, Anna's heart is accidentally frozen by Elsa's magic, and she is told that only "an act of true love" can thaw it. Here is the clip:

<https://youtu.be/33Pk1ZDJfsc>

This act of love reverses our expectations from the traditional scenes of romantic love to expanding our horizons to see love as much larger.

And so in today's Bible story, we are continuing in the scene from a meal Jesus was having at a Pharisee's house where he was trying to expand the horizons of the people who were present at that dinner. He gave them a parable about someone who had a big dinner party and invited guests to it, but on the day of the dinner as his slave was sent out to summon the guests, they all had excuses for not attending. Then this man was left with a lot of food ready and a home prepared for a party but no people to attend. Then comes the great reversal. Let's watch the scripture for today.

Luke 14:15-24

<sup>15</sup> One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” <sup>16</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. <sup>17</sup> At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ <sup>18</sup> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ <sup>19</sup> Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ <sup>20</sup> Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ <sup>21</sup> So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ <sup>22</sup> And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ <sup>23</sup> Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. <sup>24</sup> For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

The dominant theme of the Gospel of Luke is about reversal of expectations and roles in the realm of God. In this Gospel, the story of Jesus starts out with Mary's song in Luke 1:52-53

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> God has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.

Jesus lived into this vision of turning expectations upside down and in this parable, he told this incredible parable where the host's generosity is not wasted because people refused to accept it. Instead, the host gets proactive and pursues people who are more open to his grace and generosity, those on the streets and those who are often overlooked for such dinner invitations.

I would like us to consider this story from the perspective that we represent both groups, the ones with excuses and also the ones who get generously included without having the right qualifications for such extravagance of grace.

In our own lives, there are many times when we are distracted by the stuff of life: fears, responsibilities, goals, worries, obsessions, and expectations. And so we make excuses and keep ourselves safe from the banquet of God's love because deep down, we know that if we surrender to this grace, it changes everything. And we are not always ready for that. Most of the time this resistance is not even on the conscious level. It is a program that is running in the background, in the shadows.

Consider the difference between the two groups. The first one is that of ordinary people with ordinary awareness of life. They have families, responsibilities, and work to attend to. They are unable to partake in the joy of the feast of life because their focus is only on managing the affairs of life. The second group had already been stripped of the illusions of success, power, security, and esteem. They are the ones who know their own vulnerabilities and their need to belong to the table and thus they are the ones who are open to grace.

The poor and the afflicted are not better than other people. They just are more advanced in their openness to grace. The emotional programs for happiness which we often cling to are stripped away when we find ourselves vulnerable. Their sense of vulnerability and need for grace made it possible for them to attend the feast.

Meeting Jesus at the table today is about dwelling in our vulnerability and coming to his table of grace knowing that our imperfection and our struggles are not only tolerated at the table but are essential to our deeper connection to God.

Today I would like to invite us to enter into a song by Leonard Cohen called Anthem. It shows the power of embracing our human imperfection and frailty to embrace the joy of life. Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) was renowned for his deeply poetic and often melancholic lyrics, exploring themes of love, loss, spirituality, and the human condition. Even though, he was born into an affluent family in Canada, he lost his father at the age of 9 and his mother was emotionally distant. He wrestled with depression and tried to explore different religious paths to help him spiritually including a six-year stint in a

Buddhist monastery. But it was not until later in life that he realized that he had to embrace his imperfections and vulnerabilities that he was able to find more joy in life. This is best expressed in his beautiful song, Anthem, with this refrain:

The birds they sang  
At the break of day  
Start again  
I heard them say  
Don't dwell on what has passed away  
Or what is yet to be

Ah, the wars they will be fought again  
The holy dove, she will be caught again  
Bought and sold, and bought again  
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

We asked for signs  
The signs were sent  
The birth betrayed  
The marriage spent  
Yeah, and the widowhood  
Of every government  
Signs for all to see

I can't run no more  
With that lawless crowd  
While the killers in high places  
Say their prayers out loud  
But they've summoned, they've summoned up  
A thundercloud  
They're going to hear from me

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

You can add up the parts  
But you won't have the sum  
You can strike up the march  
There is no drum  
Every heart, every heart

To love will come  
But like a refugee

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

That's how the light gets in  
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<https://youtu.be/mDTph7mer3I>. Amen.