

January 27, 2008

Luke 14:16b-24

The Greatest Fellowship Dinner Ever Held

Things have **borders**, you know, edges where you know where the inside starts and the outside leaves off.

- You walk through the door into the church and you are no longer outside on the sidewalk.
- You enter through customs into the country and you are no longer in a foreign land.
- You go through initiation to join a group and you are no longer an outsider.

It's good to know where the **boundaries** lie so we don't trespass into someone else's space.

It's important to know who are the citizens and members so we understand who has access to which rights and privileges.

Groups give us identity. People who share something with us whether it's a passion for riding horses, collecting stamps, or maintaining sobriety help define us to ourselves and to the world. Cliques and cults, communes and cultures shape our values and beliefs.

Groups give us power. United we stand. Together we fight for our rights. Groups are political: they exercise power to make things work the way the members want. Groups raise money and gather people to have influence.

Jesus went about knocking down borders and trespassing over boundaries.

Jesus redrew the lines of what groups mean and how power works.

Jesus understood identity without borders, something given by God, something not defined by any groups.

He wasn't impressed by money or position, citizenship or religion.

His vision about how things could be got him in trouble every time he turned around because Jesus wanted to turn the world upside down.

He said the world we know is upside down.

It's time for reversal and repentance and redemption.

"The kingdom of God," said Jesus, "is right here, right now."

Jesus was at one of those banquets where people scrutinized him and criticized him for his flagrant trespasses over religious boundaries.

So he healed a man, right there, at the banquet, on sabbath, violating the commandment about not working on that day and stirring things up.

It was one of those banquets where people took the best seats they could.

Jesus noticed and commented:

"When you go to a hotsy totsy meal like this one is here in the home of this leader of the Pharisees you really ought to sit at some unpretentious place. Otherwise you might be embarrassed if somebody more powerful and prestigious than you comes along and unseats you. Besides, you might get lucky and the host might notice you down there in the cheap seats and publically invite you up to a place of honor."

One of the guests got all excited and blurted out:

"Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

So Jesus told a story - a story about a banquet.

It was a story, I guess, about who's in and who's out.

The host sent out all the invitations. However, between the time when the invitations went out and the time of the banquet circumstances changed.

The slave went out saying, "Everything's ready. Come on."

But nobody came.

They had their reasons.

One had bought property and needed to go inspect it.

One had bought teams of oxen and needed to go try them.

One had married and needed to stay home.

They were polite. They were respectful. They couldn't attend.

The host grew hot with anger.

Now why do you think Jesus told this little story?

He's at a banquet.

He's offended some by healing a man on the sabbath.

He's angered others by commenting on their social climbing.

He's responded to a dinner guest who exclaims how good it is to eat in the kingdom of God by telling a story about a banquet.

The host in Jesus' story is offended.

Perhaps he feels snubbed.

Maybe he's thwarted. Maybe he needed those wealthy guests for personal prestige. Did you ever plan a party - a birthday party - or a graduation party - and the honored guests stayed away? Were you angry? Did you believe the reasons they gave for why they couldn't come? Did you pull down the decorations and throw out the cake, crying all the while, wishing you were dead?

Maybe the host in Jesus' story *should* have believed the guests.

After all, they're not talking about alarm clocks that didn't go off, or trains that got stopped on the tracks blocking traffic, or misplaced datebooks.

Hey, business is business. You've got to take care of land and livestock.

Everybody knows that getting married takes priority over everything.

Maybe the host shouldn't have gone off in a rage, seething how none of the guests would ever taste any of his food.

Is this a story about boundaries and barriers?

Do we know who's in and who's out?

Not yet.

The host sends out the slaves to bring in all the outsiders they can find.

They go to street people and back alleyway people. They invite physically disabled people and poor people.

Imagine these folk limping in, feeling their way along, trying to make sense

out of what has just happened to them. They have no excuses: they can't buy land or livestock. They never get invited to houses like this. They stand there looking at linen and silver, wondering which fork to use... feeling out of place and ill at ease.

But there's still room in the hall. So the master sends the slaves back out - outside the walls, outside the city to the lanes and roads, to the transients on the highways, compelling people to come in.

Compelling? Can you see some slave coaxing some hardheaded person who wants nothing to do with that master up on the hill who makes deals and decisions which affect life down at the mill, or changes things in the fields on the farm, and who neither knows nor cares? How hard is it to get people to go up to the big house when they have nothing to wear? They don't want to be there. We may have fairy tells about Cinderella going to the ball, but in reality, we *don't like* to be outside our class and beyond the borders of our groups.

"Bring them in. We're having a feast. Everybody's welcome - except for those people I first invited," says the host.

What does Jesus' story about a banquet mean?

Could it mean that insiders are out and outsiders are in?

Does it mean there comes a time when it's too late to eat and your invitation will be withdrawn?

He told a story about borders and boundaries, I guess, and left it hanging in the air for us to ponder.

Think about it a second. Here's the greatest fellowship dinner ever held and the guests won't or can't come. So new guests are compelled. And the hall is full. But it's not filled with the people you'd think. The ones you'd think were not there - had become unwelcome there - are outside. And the boundaries are shifted and the borders changed. Has Jesus just destroyed the borders of class and religion, social custom and convention with his little story, told to guests at a banquet, and to us....

Because the host is gracious.

And the halls will be filled...

And, is it too late to get in?