

You Asked for It: So What's Stopping You?
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Luke 14:15-24

A recent "Real Life Adventures" comic in the *Plain Dealer* caught my eye. The single panel shows a woman heading out the door, saying to her husband who is seated in a recliner reading the newspaper: "What do you mean, you're not going to church with me?" To which he replies, "Sorry. I might want to run for president someday, and I just can't take a chance of the pastor saying something goofy that I'll have to explain." The caption underneath reads "The Obama Excuse." At least you can't beat it for creativity! From "the dog ate my homework" to "what is 'is'?" we humans have superior skills at self-justifying explanations for our choices, perspectives, and behavior.

The sermon topic was requested by a member who wonders about the barriers people put up that between them and church. *Why do we hesitate to join in worship, to minister to one another, to reach out beyond our walls?* he wrote. *Are we afraid of what God's grace might mean in our lives? Do we think we're unworthy? Do we just make excuses?* He voiced his own reluctance to stay for coffee hour, for example ("I'm no good at small talk!"), or participate in a class or small group ("I'm too busy!"). Yet he's becoming aware of some of the limitations imposed by those attitudes and can't quite shake the feeling that he's missing something.

Jesus once told a parable in which guests invited to a great banquet all gave excuses for why they could not attend. The context for this story was a dinner to which Jesus had been invited at the home of a religious leader. During the meal, Jesus contrasted genuine hospitality with social "obligations"—and how grace is extended without expectation of reciprocity. Once again, he pushes back the carefully-constructed

boundaries of social convention and religious purity. The vision he paints here is of abundance and celebration; and yet one by one, the chosen guests' own excuses become barriers that keep them from experiencing either. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Luke in the fourteenth chapter at the 15th verse.

[LUKE 14:15-24]

Cleveland pitching ace and Hall-of-Famer Bob Feller celebrated the 50th anniversary of his rookie season this year. In 1938, when he was all of 19 years old, he threw 277 and 2/3 innings, struck out 240, and in his final start, set a major league record with 18 strikeouts against Detroit. Feller remembered that game: "The last hitter was Chet Laabs, and I already struck him out four times. He was called out again to end the game. Chet says to the umpire, 'You missed that last one.' And the umpire says, 'Maybe, but you missed the first 14, so you're out!'"

Well. A reminder that even "good" excuses won't always save you, especially when they're not backed up by practice. The excuses offered by the invitees in the biblical parable weren't "bad" *per se*. Biblical scholar Ken Bailey who lived in the Middle East for many years, points out that dinner invitations from wealthy, well-connected persons were issued well in advance, but the specific time to arrive was communicated on the day of the event, as preparations were completed. These would-be guests would have already accepted the invitation, but when the meal was ready, they were ready.... with their excuses. The anger of the host is tripped by their casual disregard for his hospitality, and the way they allow other responsibilities to trump their original commitment. The host may very well have felt the sting of their refusal as a slap in the face. There is truth, after all, to the Yiddish proverb that claims *If you don't want to do something, one excuse is as good as another.*

...and all excuses become a kind of barrier. The would-be guests barred themselves from the generosity and fellowship of their neighbor. Look again at the context for this story. Here's Jesus, in the home of a religious teacher, secure and

well-connected, surrounded by others of similar circumstance. Apparently Jesus intended them to interpret this as metaphor about the Realm of God, and to raise questions in their mind about their own reluctance to embrace it. Nor should we ignore the persistent theme in the gospels that God's Kingdom often feels like an onerous obligation to the privileged, and a banquet of blessing to outsiders and those in need. We might look at this text first from the perspective of our own excuses. How do you and I explain our tepid response to God's grace? What makes us fear the new? Why do we so often resist experiences that might require changed behavior or perspective, in favor of just staying put? What is stopping you and me from coming to the joyful feast God has prepared for us?

A friend who provides daily child care for a number of preschoolers told me about a trick one of the three-year-olds played. Momentarily alone in the bathroom, the little lass locked the door and then called to my friend to come find her. Polly went to the door, knocked, and told the little girl to unlock the door to let her in. But when the little girl realized Polly could not just open the door, she became afraid and began to cry. She forgot how to unlock the door. Finally my friend had to jimmy the lock with a coat hanger. Even though her own mischief had caused the predicament, the little girl ran straight into the outstretched arms of the very one she had locked out.

This incident seems illustrative of our human predicament. How often--and how effectively--do we lock out the very ones whose loving arms we seek! Fear can prevent our remembering that we hold the key to unlock the door of our hearts and lives to let another in.

I believe this also describes our relationship to God sometimes. By seeking to control our lives, to determine our own destiny, we lock God out. But then we realize the freedom we thought we'd achieved is a small confining space that no one else can enter. We may be master of our universe, but when you stop

and think about it, what does it really mean to be the boss. . . .
of a bathroom?

Excuses keep us locked in a closet of egocentrism. They're focused exclusively on "me"; my needs, my evaluations, my perspective. And the life of Christian community is not about you; it's not about me. It's about God; it's about "us" together demonstrating God's love and welcome. The next time you think about whether or not to attend worship, consider that your presence and participation could minister to someone else. When your first impulse is to think of yourself ("It's too hot;" "I don't like the hymns;" "The preacher might say something that makes me uncomfortable;" "They might ask me to give money/teach Sunday School/pass the peace/pray an unfamiliar version of the Lord's Prayer;") take a moment to think instead of another person. You might become the bearer of God's grace to a person who comes here sad or discouraged or lonely or anxious. You might make the difference for them. The great thing is, in God's economy those who give, receive more in return! Overcoming our egocentric perspective by extending ourselves toward another produces joy in learning, personal growth, and deeper connections with one another.

Another great thing is, in the community of faith, you are not alone. You don't have to figure it all out by yourself. Your brothers and sisters in God's house are poised ready to greet you, learn your children's names, cook a meal for you when you are in grief or in transition, pray for you, listen to your concerns, serve side by side with you, search out meaning with you in life's hard questions, have fun and laugh with you. What for most of us is one of the hardest things we ever do--- that is, to admit our vulnerability --- is received by others in this community who share that vulnerability. At the heart of our ministry is an acknowledgement that we all stand in need of God's mercy and grace. That realization turns our excuses into opportunities. Allow us, for example, to counter the excuse "...but I don't know anyone!" with the reality of our eagerness to meet you. The nametag program we'll inaugurate

August 10 recognizes the expressed need of members to greet each other by name and giving us a tool to do so. Your fear that you may be invited to do something is probably valid, BUT!—you'll never be asked to serve alone, AND you just might discover a hidden talent that becomes a new passion. The person who requested this sermon topic told me he made a new year's resolution to stay for coffee hour. At first he found himself gravitating to the people he already knew. But little by little he began to approach others he didn't know and introducing himself. He's amazed at the persons he now looks for eagerly, individuals he would never have connected with outside of church.

Probably the most common excuse which holds us back from responding to God's invitation to participate in God's Realm is "I'm too busy." And we ARE busy! --checking out our land, trying out our oxen, keeping our families on schedule, schlepping our children to their 100 and 5 activities, trying to achieve success and balance and a full life. The point of Jesus' parable may not so much to scold the busy invitees, but to remind them (and us) not to refuse the best thing, the most important priority, the truth that will bring us joy and peace beyond anything else. Our excuses become barriers to the abundance of grace God offers; the life that really is life—free *from* fear that diminishes; free *for* love that nourishes.

Simple, right? Yet did you notice the detail in the parable about “compelling” people to come to the dinner? Oh great, now we’re supposed to force religion on people???! Ken Bailey explains the cultural reality behind this puzzling comment. In Middle Eastern society, one is supposed to refuse invitations from those of a higher social status, with the idea being that such invitations are polite gestures but not meant to be accepted. "After some discussion the servant will finally have to take the startled guest by the arm and gently pull him along. There is no other way to convince him that he really is invited to the great banquet." [*Kenneth Bailey, Poet and Peasant: Through Peasant Eyes, Eerdmans Publishing, 1980*] Sometimes barriers have to be removed in order to welcome party-goers.

A recent story in the *New York Times* profiled a once-proud Manhattan church that had fallen on hard times. The familiar litany of denominational decline, changing neighborhood, elderly membership, and decreasing role of religion in family life had all contributed to the malaise. The regional body took steps to close it. Until. Some of the members and a retired minister thought there should be another outcome. They began to visit homes and businesses in the neighborhoods surrounding the church. They met new people, listened to their concerns, and invited them to worship. Lo and behold, some of the neighbors began attending. But then a strange thing happened. The long-time church members began to notice that the new people were different. Not all of them spoke English comfortably. The children they had longed to see were there, but their presence ratcheted up the noise and commotion during worship; one parent or another seemed always to be traipsing down the aisle with kid in tow, headed to the bathroom.And the members rejoiced. They added some church school classes and a children's sermon, and took turns providing infant care during services. One older gentleman interviewed for the story proudly noted the evening English language classes they've organized, and chuckled over reactions to the mariachi band which accompanied the hymn-singing one Sunday. "That was a bit tough for some of us to swallow at first," he admitted, "but who would want to stifle what's happening here now?"

.....sounds like the Kingdom of God to me. A feast of abundance. A table with lots of place settings. A church where the guests are hungry and the bread tastes like grace. So what's stopping us?

AMEN.

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