

April 27, 2008 8:30am and 11am Worship
First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA
Topic: Being Invitational – Looking Like the Fool

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Text: Luke 15:11-24

Introduction

Did you ever see or hear of the movie “Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner?” It is the 1968 Oscar winning film with Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracey, and Sidney Poitier about a woman who takes her fiancé home to meet her parents. What is so interesting about this story is that these upper class white parents do not know that this fiancé is of a different race until he arrives at their home. Well, he walks through their door and they have to deal with all their feelings and deep-seated prejudices.

Background

In the account found in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus brings some surprising people to dinner, and there are many people in the Jewish religious family who do not like it! Let us take a closer look at the account itself and see what is going on here.

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

What is happening here? If we go back a chapter or so we discover that Jesus is traveling in and around Jerusalem meeting and teaching people wherever he can find them.

Who were these “sinners”? According to the religious Jews, they were those who broke the laws of God and the rules of the Pharisees. People like tax collectors, prostitutes, those who were socially undesirable and morally suspect. Today we might think of big city politicians, casino operators, drug dealers, or X rated bookstore owners.

Why were they coming “near”? They most likely felt accepted, not judged, even though there were many reasons to judge them. Like others who were attracted to Jesus, they discovered that he taught with authority, great wisdom, and he seemed to know not only what was on their minds, but more importantly, what was on their hearts.

2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Why were they upset? Jesus was definitely ignoring many things sacred to the Pharisees. First, he was violating the code of ritual cleanliness. According to Pharisaic law you could not have contact with someone who was unclean and still worship in the temple. The whole religious system was designed to clearly identify those who were “righteous”, acceptable in God’s eyes, and those who clearly were not. Like an exclusive club, there were members with privileges. As for those on the outside, you had little to do with them. Jesus was going outside the acceptable social boundaries. Jesus was not only talking to these “outsiders”, he was eating with them and showing acceptance of those the religious had condemned.

There is great significance in this “eating with them.” In eating with these outsiders, Jesus demonstrated his willingness to relate to them at a close, personal level. He was saying by his actions that they were valuable, important, and worth knowing. Particularly, if Jesus was hosting the meal, according to Middle Eastern tradition, he was saying to them that they were very important and that they even brought honor to his house and family. One Bible commentator put it like this:

“To invite a man to a meal was an honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life.” This would be outrageous to the religiously rigid. They could not comprehend why Jesus would do this.

3 So he told them this parable:

Jesus tells them this parable: trilogy - Lost Sheep Lost Coin Lost Sons was designed to put the listener in the story. He had them identify with the shepherd, the feeling of losing something important, costly rescue, being found, rejoicing, repentance.

The Text: Luke 15:11-31

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but one no gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for his son; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer to be called your son.’

But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

There are many surprises in this story for the original audience. Things in this story are not as common place as you and I might think. They are not very probable. In fact, they are practically inconceivable! Many times in this parable, if you were a first century Jewish listener, you would have shook your head and said, “**Can you believe this? Who would do such a thing ?!**” Let us look at these surprises.

1. The first is the request of the younger son. Who would have the nerve to say such a thing? He was demanding his inheritance and wishing his father was dead. Many people have trouble with their parents, but who would want them dead on the spot?! This was unheard of!

2. Next was the father’s response. In his day this father would have been expected to slap the boy in the face and kick him out of the house. Of course, he would refuse such a request! He was wealthy, as evidenced by a large estate, calves and goats, servants, and a large party with musicians. He was respected in the community. Transferring such a large

inheritance was a serious matter. The father gave a two fold gift here: 1) he does not reject or punish the son, and then 2) he divides the property between his sons and grants them their inheritance and the right to sell.

3. Third is the older brother's passiveness. What was the older brother doing all this time? Why didn't the older brother speak up at his sibling's outrageous request? Why didn't he seek to reconcile his brother and his father? It was his responsibility as the closest next of kin. Why didn't he refuse the inheritance? What kind of son was he?

4. Fourth is the quick sale of the property. Even though the father made it clear and legal as to who would get what property when he died, no one would ever think of selling the property while the father was still alive. The sons were expected to take care of their father until he died. But the younger son, having openly shamed the family in the community, has to get out of town. The community is horrified by his open rebellion and disrespect. They are angry at this son. His behavior threatens the very fabric of the whole community. So the younger son ignores Jewish law, which does not permit such a sale, turns his property into cash and gets out of town.

5. Fifth is the son's employment. So the son leaves and wastes the money, probably among Gentiles. Hard times hit and he is completely without resources: no friends, no money, no home, no job, and no food. So he clings to a farmer who tries to get rid of him by giving him the job of feeding pigs. This was the lowest he could go, a Jewish boy from a good family working for a Gentile and feeding the unclean pigs.

Well, he finally comes to his senses. Things at home were a lot better. He knows he needs to recover the money or he will be cut off if he returns. So he develops a plan. He will go home, start at the bottom, not live at home, and slowly work things out. Yes, he'll get job training, and earn his way back into the community and the family. He just needs his father's cooperation.

So the son heads home. He knows because of the way he left, he should come back only if he had generous gifts for his family. But he has nothing. He enters the village ready to be greeted by jeers, mockery, and most likely, physical violence. Imagine the scene: The son is at edge of the village. The houses are close together in a row, each have courtyards in front. The word spreads that the son is returning and a crowd begins to form. They have been waiting for this moment. Here he comes. Like a dog with his head bowed low and tail between his legs, beaten, embarrassed and poor. They think to themselves, "Now we are going let him have it. How dare he shame his father, his family, and our community?! We know what we are going to do with him!" And they start to line up, from little kids to old men.

6. The Biggest Surprise of All - Father Runs. Meanwhile, the Father, sees the son a long way off. So, he takes a seat in his chair and waits for his son to come begging and then he would discipline him. No, he didn't want a servant; he wanted to have his son. So he runs. He runs? Middle Eastern noblemen don't run. It is a disgrace! It is just was not done. He looks like a fool. He runs down and takes the attention away from his son and puts it on himself so he could save his son. He becomes a fool for love. He risks the scorn and reaction of the community to save and restore his son.

Everyone expected him to vent his full wrath, but to their bewilderment, he let loose with his most lavish love. Instead of sitting in grand isolation waiting, he breaks with custom and runs like a mother and embraces and kisses the boy again and again. His son is amazed and stunned. The son confesses and stops. Such grace cannot be earned, just humbly received. For no rational reason the boy is restored fully to the family. He is given:

- 1) sandals to show all that he is a son, not a servant;
- 2) his father's best robe to show he is to be accepted and honored; and
- 3) the signet ring which gives him the authority of his father.

The father's actions signal to the rest of the community how they are to treat the boy, as a restored son. There is no debt due for the past, it is forgiven. **"Can you believe this? Who would do such a thing?!" Jesus would and did.**

Summary

The father in this story displays the heart of God, offering love to those who don't deserve it. In this scene the father evolved into a symbol for Jesus. He left comfort, security, and power and descended into the mob. A lost son is found at the edge of the village, he finds him and restores him. This was truly a costly demonstration of unexpected love!

Isn't this what being a Christian, a follower of Jesus is all about? God offering us love we do not deserve? Jesus leaving his status and comfort behind and taking on our frail human condition so on the cross he could rescue us from the wrath of sin? Even today, in the midst of our destructive, angry, and confused ways, Jesus pours his lavish, forgiving love on us.

Application

Is there someone you know who is lost? Maybe there is a family member, friend, a neighbor, a person at work or school, who by their words and actions, demonstrate that they are not connected to God? Picture that person in your mind right now and whisper his or her name. Jesus loves that person and has a special place in his heart for him or her. Guess what? Jesus wants you and me to love them, too. Can you find one way this week to connect with them? Give them a call. Stop to talk with them this weekend. Ask Jesus today how you can serve them and let the Holy Spirit guide you.

Is there someone here today who whispered his or her own name? Do you feel lost and not very close to God at all? Please know that Jesus is eager to welcome you back and to even carry you home. Just whisper a prayer to him. Say, "Help me, forgive me, make me pure and brand new. Jesus, I trust you with my life. Thank you for dying for me. Send your Spirit to live in me now. Amen."

Don't wait for a special occasion to let God love you and to love through you. Do it today. Like the father in the parable, God is throwing a colossal party for all to attend, and you can start celebrating now. The main course at this feast is love. And God wants you to partake of it and help serve it, generously and with joy.