

Luke 14:15-24  
Abounding with Thanksgiving  
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I don't know about you, but one of the most beloved Thanksgiving traditions in my family is the annual giving of thanks around the dinner table. It happens after we've piled on the turkey, stuffing, and sweet potato casserole. Each one takes his or her turn in sharing reflections and recognition for their loved ones and those who have been a blessing throughout the year. And when each person has poured their heart out and not a dry eye remains, we hold our glasses high for the ceremonial toast of the host. And there is no more fulfilling moment all day than hearing the glasses go clink as they are brought together.

There are Scriptures that sound as if we are toasting God. In Revelation 1:5, John writes, "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood." Cheers! You may even want to replace the toast of the host with a toast to our abundantly loving God this year. The clink of the toast is really the capstone moment of every great meal, after all other senses have been engaged. The clink of the glasses is really like the Amen to a wonderful day of food and fellowship.

God is the God of all five senses. Psalm 34 calls us to taste and see God's abundant goodness. There is perhaps no other time of year when we are reminded of God's nourishing provision than Thanksgiving when we celebrate the blessings of harvest and the relationships that nurture our souls. But can you imagine what it would be like to prepare an elaborate meal with all the fixings only to have your guests bail at the last moment?

This very thing happened in one of Jesus' parables, recounted in our Scriptures in the Gospel of Luke chapter 14 verses 15-24.

**When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"**

A few years ago, I strode out to the mailbox to find an elaborate and decorative invitation inviting me to an evening of food and fellowship. "We hope you can come," it read. Problem was, even though there was a date and time, there was no signature, no RSVP, no indication of

who was hosting this event. I thought to myself how tragic this was. I can just imagine this person spending hours and hours sprucing up the house, preparing the food and feverishly preparing for their guests. Then on the big day asking, “Where is everybody?” How devastated they must have been.

In this morning’s text, Jesus tells of a wealthy landowner who does just this. Sparing no expense, he prepares a lavish feast for his carefully selected friends. Now in those days, a feast like this would come with great anticipation. Similar to our wedding celebrations, there would be two notices that went out: one as a save the date, and the other would come the day of the feast, in which a servant would drop by in person to say the feast is ready, y’all come!

In Jesus’ parable, the unthinkable happens: upon the master’s request that his friends and colleagues join him for dinner, he receives only excuses. One property owner says, “I just bought this field over in another county which I must go inspect.” Another has just closed a deal—having purchased five teams of oxen—and he wants to check out his investment. Another man, on his honeymoon, has certain responsibilities to which he must attend, which prevent him showing up. Whatever the excuse, the result is the same. The host has been stood up.

And Luke tells us the host “became angry.” Wouldn’t you be? But just beneath the anger lay profound hurt, and disappointment, and a sense of rejection. Here he had extended a generous gift to his buddies, only to have the RSVP return with, “thanks but no thanks.”

Isn’t it true that sometimes the easiest people for us to reject are those who are closest to us? Oh, they’ll be alright, after all we’ll have plenty of other opportunities to share with each other. But little do these guests realize that the master is not concerned with massaging professional and familial relationships. This meal has nothing to do with boosting his own social standing in the community. The master wants to celebrate...and do it now! Regardless of who joins him.

The kind of gratitude Jesus’ parable teaches for us, particularly at this time of year, is gratitude born out of something great taking place in our lives. This simple gratitude is something we see over and over throughout the gospels. Jesus comes bearing the good gift of healing and wholeness and salvation, and our only response is simple gratitude and thanksgiving.

Matthew’s Gospel teaches this message in a different light: when the woman anointed his head with costly oil, the others scoffed at her careless disregard for valuable ointment. “That could have been used for the poor.” To which Jesus responds, “Why do you trouble this woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Our Lord wants for us to share in his joyful celebration. All that is needed is a willing heart and a spirit of thankfulness. The master’s call was an urgent one. If my friends and family won’t come, then go out and find **anyone** who wants to share this meal with me, and bring ‘em to me. They are my chosen guests. Each time we join with him at his table, Christ wants us to come with this simple willingness to receive his good gifts and give thanks for his lavish blessing. Friends, wherever we worship Christ, in whatever form that takes, let us never lose our sense of awe in being invited to share at Christ’s table.

Believe it or not, there are people who believe that it is such a solemn and serious event that they refuse receive it with joy. Sharing at Christ's table is such wonderful gift that the parable tells us, "Ok, if they don't want to come, go out and find anyone who will and welcome them." When Christ finds us in the highways and byways and welcomes us in to his feast, we experience a genuine, tried and true miracle. Let us never lose that sense of awe and wonder when we share in his feast.

In this case, thankfulness is not just a response to something great taking place. When Christ comes to us inviting us to share with him, thankfulness is the response to the miraculous.

There's a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called *Babette's Feast*, about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night, her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes. Because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent. "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally, the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine, the finest vintage in all of France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?"

By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast." Can you think of anyone else who gave his all to make us a loving community through the gift of a meal?

This Thanksgiving, let's offer a toast to the God who goes out into the highways and byways to find sinners like us, that we might sit at his table.

Amen.