

Joshua 5:9-12

⁹The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Luke 14:15-24

The Parable of the Great Dinner

¹⁵One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, ‘Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’ ¹⁶Then Jesus said to him, ‘Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for everything is ready now.” ¹⁸But 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 apologies.” ¹⁹Another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.” ²⁰Another said, “I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.” ²¹So 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.” ²²And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” ²³Then 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. ²⁴For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”’

Ready for a Change worship series: Lent 4

Choices

We find some irony in both of our readings for today: In the Hebrew lesson we find a seemingly joyous thing happening. The Israelites enter the Promised Land and on the day after Passover they start eating something other than manna. Where did they get the fresh produce and the grain? Well they didn’t plant it because they just crossed the river into the land called Canaan. You notice that they eat the produce on the day *after* the Passover feast, a day of the holy feast. And it’s the day that the manna stops. And they eat people’s crops. What do you do if you’re a farmer? The irony is that the “celebration” marks the beginning of a military campaign. Having spent forty years in the wilderness, this new generation now goes on a 26-year military campaign to conquer Canaan, eating anyone’s grain that they felt like eating. It’s not unlike the European “conquest” of the Americas, North, Central, and South. It’s not unlike the Roman conquest of the land they called Palestine. They’re just entering the realm of Nationhood, or Nationhood-with-some-decent-farmland, because the Sinai Peninsula was just not prime real estate. This generation was going to fight for the land that God had promised them. And today the children of Abraham are still fighting over that land.

The irony of the New Testament lesson? It’s pretty clear. This is the party that no one came to, or at least not anyone on the original guest list. Apparently none of the original guests considers the host important *enough* for them to alter their plans. Their land, their machinery, their spouses, were more important. And though I don’t know if it was ever Luke’s intention that this parable be interpreted as an indictment against Jews who are understood to be the guests who wouldn’t come to the banquet and the poor, the lame, and those who dwell in the far reaches are understood to be the gentiles who respond correctly to the invitation, but the last two thousand years has seen more than its share of pogroms, persecutions, even attempted genocide, and the Bible has been used to justify such barbarism. Was that ever God’s intention?

I don't think Luke was trying to put down Jews; I think he was trying to put down the haughty. You see, Jesus tells this parable at the dinner table of a leader of the Pharisees, and before he launches into this parable he's pretty direct in telling both the host and the guests how haughty they are, the guests seeking places of honor, and the host only inviting guests for political reasons, in order to gain favor. It's right after this chastisement that Jesus tells this parable, so it's not against the Jews so much as it is against the proud and haughty.

Proud and haughty may not be ways we would describe ourselves, but if we apply this parable to ourselves, I think you might see things differently. We live in a time of choices. There are so many options for how we spend our precious time, and we are always making choices about what's more important to us. And it's those things that are more important to us that consume our time and cause us to turn down invitations to things that are less important to us. The point of the parable is that God invites us to a great dinner, and we decline for any number of reasons that sound quite reasonable but betray the truth that there are simply more important things to us than God, and we have chosen to make them more important than God. Love between two people is a beautiful thing, sometimes, but it's not as strong or steadfast as God's love. Providing for your family is important, as is self-improvement, but who gave you the family to begin with and who gave you those gifts that you want to improve? And when it comes to serving the poor, welcoming the stranger, helping the most needy, we come up with lots of great reasons not to which usually translates to more service to our selves, or our city or our nation. We construct a wall somewhere where our charity ends, and most would say that things look better inside their walls than outside – that's why you built the wall in the first place; to protect the things inside of it. But when you strip away all that is frivolous the only thing you're left with is *you*. That's why I said that first reason we turn down dinner invitations from God is our ego that tells us that we *are* more important than God; that's why people are always looking for God's minimum requirements. They think of God as a nice guy, and a nice neighbor, but maybe a bit boring for us, so you see your business or your family or your home as just more important than him; "Sorry God. Can't make it tomorrow; something came up. Maybe next time."

But we shouldn't assign all the blame to the guests in this parable. Don't forget that there is a messenger, and as a pastor I feel a close connection to this role; I have made it my vocation to bring the message of the Gospel not only to those in the church but those outside it as well. And so if people are refusing the invitation I shouldn't just cast judgment on *them*. I should look at myself and ask, "Just how good a messenger am I?" Am I trying to reach everyone, or am I more concerned about sharing the good news with those who I like more? Am I threatening people, telling them what horrible things will happen if they don't come to God's banquet? People's refusal to make communion with God a priority may have something to do with the messenger. We are God's PR people. It's our job to make the dinner invitation appealing to those we invite. Of course there will be people who have no interest no matter how much you sing and dance to invite them into the church, but what about those who have genuine interest in joining the church but who sense that they are less welcome than other people? How often are we the very people who are caught up in our own self-importance, and take the name of the Lord in vain by justifying sin in the name of God? How often do our choices betray the fact that we have not made Jesus' priorities our priorities. And when we, the messengers, get bogged down with self-importance, what kind of an impression do we leave on those really are genuinely interested in coming to Christ's dinner table?

So in this fourth week of Lent, I'd like you to consider the choices you have made. Look at your weekly routines, look at how you spend your downtime – now I know that everyone needs recreation; God installed that Sabbath for just such a reason. We need breaks from certain tasks – we need some entertainment, and we certainly need some sleep. But look at those choices and ask yourself if you're turning down invitations to God's dinner parties. Are there times that you could be fed living water and instead you're drinking tap water. Are there times when you could be drawing closer to God but you forfeit that time to something that fails to satisfy.