

A husband and wife are enjoying their wedding reception. So much planning had been poured into making this occasion perfect. It's the day they'd been dreaming about. Finally, it's arrived and their dreams are coming true. So, there they are, the two of them—their lives intertwined for the rest of their earthly existence. And now that the Champagne Toast is over, the newly married couple sits down at the head table. After all that, the groom turns to his bride and says, "Y'know Honey, this has been great and all, but I'm really looking forward to my retirement party." What a thing to say, right? You couldn't blame her if she threw her champagne right in his face!

Well, as far as Jesus is concerned something like that's happening to Him in this morning's Gospel text. Here He is, the Messiah long foretold, and He's attending a dinner party put on by one of the most prominent Pharisees. While reclining, some nincompoop from across the table blurts out, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" And while that sounds innocent enough, it's what inspires Jesus to tell today's parable—you can think of it as a verbal glass of champagne thrown in the man's face.

You see, here's what rubbed Jesus the wrong way. This man is sitting just inches away from God Incarnate, Mr. Bread of Life, I mean the very Kingdom of the heavens is literally at hand—and here's this guy running his mouth about how blessed those folks will be way off in the future when they eat bread in the kingdom of God some day! Smooth, right! I mean, he's sitting at table with the Living Bread from Heaven *right now*—he should be saying instead how blessed he is to break bread that very moment with God's Kingdom personified, but he doesn't. No wonder Jesus takes the man's comment personally, and follows it up with this scandalous tale about the Great Banquet.

The Parable of the Great Banquet is an allegory for what Jesus finds today at this Pharisee's soiree. "A man was giving a great banquet and invited many," Jesus starts out, and no doubt He is referring to God. After all, as far as God's concerned the lamb has been slain from before the foundation of the world—the feast is all set, the invitations have been sent out. But when it came time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready." So, Jesus, God's servant, is sent out to His people, declaring that salvation is now. But instead of finding excited guests, eager to sit down at the banquet, the servant just gets a lot of excuses.

They all say that they're too busy to make it, it's just bad timing—sorry. One guy says it's his field—he's just scored some prime real estate, and now he's got to go inspect it. Another blames it on the oxen—five yoke worth—and now he's got to take them out for a spin. The last excuse comes from a man whose marriage still has that new car smell, which prevents him from even leaving the house. Bottom line, everyone's got something else to do, so everyone respectfully declines.

Now, for a man who was generous enough to throw such a party this would be quite a snub. After all, he already sent out the invitations—it's implied that these guests had RSVP'ed that they were coming since they're still on his list. And depending on how many were attending, the man would have had the appropriate-size animal slaughtered—poultry for an intimate gathering, a sheep or goat for a moderate bunch, or a cow or fatted calf for a larger crowd. So, here he is having just had one of his choicest meats prepared, and now it looks like it's going to go to waste—back in those days it's not like he could just stick it in the deep freezer.

But then, think of the excuses! You gotta go inspect the field . . . you just bought? That's like buying a house sight-unseen—no inspection, no nothing. And then you gotta test-drive the five yoke of oxen (that's 10 total, folks) after you've already paid for them in cash? Nobody would ever buy a car without kicking the tires first, right! So, what kind of excuses are these? Pretty flimsy by the sound of it. If they're yours, if you've already bought them, then it makes no difference if you go out and see them today *or tomorrow*—they'll still be there. And then the guy who just got hitched, well, not only does he have the rest of his life to spend with his new wife—I mean, that's the way it works—but in that culture it would've been a real insult for him to put a woman first before this man's great generosity. No wonder the master gets so angry when he hears this report!

But back to Jesus' party. Here he is with the religious elite, dining with these Pharisees. It's for them that He's come, after all He says elsewhere, "I've come only for the lost sheep of Israel." And it's these guys—brought up as good Hebrew boys, well-schooled in the word of God—that you'd expect would enthusiastically receive Jesus' message. But instead, when Jesus announces the in-breaking of the Kingdom, that the heavenly banquet is all set, they all start to bow out.

For some, it's their love of money and prestige that's holding them back. For others, it's the love of themselves and their self-righteousness that's getting in the way. And there are also those who find themselves locked in to other earthly engagements. Which is why they refuse to acknowledge that in Jesus they don't just have some man, but Heaven-on-two-legs is sitting right before them. At the end, when Jesus says, "For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet," it's not that God ever excludes them but rather they exclude themselves. They have all backed out, everyone declines, and God's table sits empty.

Well, of course God can't have that! He's just gotta have people at his party, so the master says to his servant, "Go out quickly to the streets and back alleys of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame." In other words, invite those who can't make excuses, those who couldn't possibly refuse such an offer, bring in those who would wholeheartedly appreciate such an invitation. After all, the poor don't have any money to buy even one ox, let alone five yoke of oxen. The crippled and lame couldn't possibly walk around a property and inspect it. And the blind wouldn't rather spend their time gazing upon the beauty of their wives, or likely be in a position to even get married in the first place for that matter. So, Jesus does just that—He goes throughout all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

But then He turns back to God, like the servant in the parable, and says, "Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room." So, the master then says, "Go out to the highways and byways and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled." Now, what this means is that not only does Jesus come for the lost sheep of Israel, but He also commissions His apostles to "Make disciples of *all* nations"—meaning even the Gentiles. "Go out beyond the borders of Israel, and bring in anybody and *everybody*, whoever desires my invitation has a reserved seat at my banquet."

Now, imagine such an offer—on the outs, excluded from the holy feasts at the Jewish temple, because you're considered ceremonially unclean on account of your disability or even your nationality—but then, all of a sudden, you're ushered into such a great banquet! It would sound too good to be true, wouldn't it—maybe that's why the master has to tell his servant to "compel people to come in": *No really, this is no joke. We truly want you there!* Such an offer would be hard to turn down, wouldn't it? Yet sometimes, the Pharisees aren't the only ones who do. Today's religious elite, good churchgoing folks like us, run that risk too. We also hem and haw, don't we—finding dumb, shallow, bogus excuses.

What do we tell Him?

*Oh Lord, I'd really like to come to church today, but I've just got too much going on right now.*

*Y'know God, I get that I need to make that change in my life, but it'll just have to wait 'til tomorrow.*

*Jesus, I appreciate that you want to speak to me through your Word and all, I'm glad that you're always ready to hear my prayers, but I think I'm okay at the moment.*

No matter what the excuse, in the grand scheme of things none of them hold up. All we're doing is excluding ourselves from the biggest party the world's ever seen. It's not God who excludes us—we do that all on our own. And if you're making excuses, stuck in your old ways, I hope this is a wakeup call.

If it is, then maybe you now realize just how poor, how crippled, how blind, and how lame you've been. How poor and empty you are when it comes to the things of God. How lame your excuses are, how you don't even have a leg left to stand on. And just how blind you've been to what really matters.

And if that's how you feel right now, then this invitation is for you—you're just the type of person God wants at His party. After all, it's the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame who get invited. He wants people who want to be there—people who not only have a big appetite for a feast, but a bigger appetite for Him. What about your excuses, you say? . . . Well, what excuses? Jesus Christ, God's Lamb, has been slain for those excuses—they died with Him on the cross. Nothing's keeping you out, so don't keep yourself out—there's no excuse not to be there! No, all the arrangements have been made, the feast is ready, all that's missing is you—so enter God's heavenly banquet hall, take your seat, and get ready to be wined and dined by a gracious Host like none other.

But don't be confused like the goofball who foolishly said, "Blessed is everyone who *will eat* bread in the kingdom of God!" This isn't just some future thing, it's a going-on-right-this-very-moment sorta thing! It's a now-and-not yet reality—while it's not yet, sure, it's also *now*! That's why it's called a foretaste of the feast to come. Spread before you, is the Eucharistic Feast, the very body and blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ! There is *forgiveness* in this food, *life* in this meal, there is *joy* at this table, as you fellowship with the Master, Almighty God Himself! So, if you wonder if you're really in and not out, then wonder no more! Here, you already have one foot in the kingdom!

There's just one more thing though. As the servant Jesus reports back to His Master, "There's still room," we find that there's still more room here around our Lord's table. I would imagine that as the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame went to the feast, they probably told everyone they met along the way all about it. The news spread, and suddenly those who were the attendees also became the messengers, as their friends and acquaintances probably tagged along for the banquet.

Friends, you and I have the great honor and privilege to invite others to the feast too. What a way to invite people to church, right—tell them they get to feast with God! Everyone's invited who will come—everyone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who desires to recline at table with their Lord. How blessed it is to be invited, but also how blessed it is to invite, and to watch God's house get filled! Yes, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But also, how blessed is everyone right here, right now who *already* eats bread in the kingdom of God!