

The Kingdom of God Is a Party

Luke 14:16-24

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

October 4, 2009

Some spiritual teachers you find under a bo tree or on a mountaintop alone, but Jesus you mostly find at *dinner*. That, of course, is how we know he was a Baptist. Why do you think that Jesus is always eating and drinking? This meal we are about to share is a remembrance not only that Jesus died but that eating and drinking were important to him. Why was it important to him? It's not that he was hungry. He could go without food when he wanted to. Jesus made a deliberate choice to eat and drink in a public and joyful way and to do it with the wrong kind of people. He made a choice not to live like a monk or John the Baptist, but to risk being labeled a party animal. Why did he do that?

Feasting was part of Jesus' message and part of what he understood the kingdom of God to mean. Many Jews of his day understood that someday God would give his people a Messianic banquet—that at the end of history when God won the great victory through his anointed king, he would spread out a banquet, a great feast to celebrate his victory. Listen to Isaiah 25:6 (NIV) "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine-- the best of meats and the finest of wines." Jesus himself says in Luke 13:29 (NIV), "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Jesus did not doubt that there will be a great feast someday when human history comes to a close, but Jesus was saying all through his ministry that the kingdom of God is at hand. The reign of God is beginning *now*. The feast of the kingdom is being acted out in your midst, because the kingdom of God is in your midst. You don't have to wait until it's all over to live in joy, Jesus says. I came that your joy might be full. I came to give you life overflowing. What I am telling you is that if you live connected to God now, if you live in the reality of God's reign, you can experience a foretaste of that final feast right now. Jesus' message is "Let's get this party started!"

This is hard for some of us to hear, because we are a product of the work ethic that views partying as a guilty pleasure. The Bible has a very different idea. I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but the faith of the Old Testament was a partying faith.

If you go back to the books of Moses, you get the idea that the religion of Israel is a three-legged stool. One leg is honoring God and no other God; another leg is social justice; and the third leg is having parties called festivals to celebrate what God has done for you. It was only much later, in the centuries just before Jesus came, that Israel's faith morphed into a religion of the book and a religion of rules. In the good old days, there was no synagogue and no idea that you had to go to services on the Sabbath. There was no weekly ritual at all. The only religious observances were the festivals in Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance from Egypt, the providential care in the wilderness, the New Year and forgiveness of sin, and, later, the rededication of the temple. We may forget that when people brought all those animals to Jerusalem to sacrifice, they were really bringing meat for a barbecue. The priests would take the best of the meat and cook it as an offering to God, so the great smell of cooking meat went up into God's nose. (I'm glad

my vegan daughter isn't here today!) But then they would take the cooked meat and give some back to the person who offered it to God. And they would all eat it together. Worship in the Old Testament consisted mostly of two things: singing and cooking. There were no sermons—Amen? Mostly, worship was a kind of partying in God's presence.

If you doubt that was God's intention, I want you to consider one section from Deuteronomy about tithing, of all things. Look at Deuteronomy 14:22-26 "Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. *Eat* the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at [the Temple], so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. But if [the Temple] is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe, then exchange your tithe for *money*, and take the *money* with you and go to [the Temple]. Use the *money* to buy whatever you like: *beef, lamb, wine or beer*, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall *eat* there in the presence of the LORD your God and *rejoice*."

Doesn't that blow your mind? The purpose of the tithe was for people to rejoice in God's presence by having a great party. The original potluck was God's invention. Yes, much of the tithe didn't get eaten up right away and went into the coffers to support the Levites who ran the Temple, just as today. But what God always wanted was to see his people celebrating his goodness. Listen to Psalm 36:7-8, "How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!/People take refuge in the shadow of your wings./They feast on the abundance of your house;/you give them drink from your river of delights."

Now Jesus comes into a world where that religion has been reduced to rules about everything and a concern about personal purity with little concern for celebration and inclusion of the poor and hurting. Jesus says by the way he lives that his faith is not like that. He is restoring the joyful faith of Israel by refusing to live as if we are in mourning because God had died. God is still king, Jesus says. His kingdom is now. His kingdom is here and will someday come in its fullness. In the mean time, we are to live in the reality of his reign—with lives of complete trust and joy. Part of that is eating and drinking and celebrating. And part of it is including all of those God has invited to the great banquet.

Think of the first miracle Jesus does in the Gospel of John. John always calls them signs—signs that point to a truth about Jesus. What then is the meaning of the first miracle at Cana of Galilee? The first miracle takes place at a wedding feast. When wealthy or middle-class Jews had a wedding, they went all out, just as today—spending a year's salary just to be sure that all the guests had a good time. They would often invite the whole village. So in John 2, Jesus goes to a wedding party, and the problem he is faced with is that there is not enough *wine*. Now if he had been Southern Baptist, he would have said "Good. Let them drink iced tea." But Jesus didn't say that. He took the perfectly good water that they had and turned it into so much wine that they could keep partying all night.

What do you think that says about Jesus? At a minimum it says that he is not the straight-laced person we sometimes try to turn him into. He made wine for no other reason than to keep the party going. And John takes that miracle and makes it the grand opening of Jesus' powers. He makes it the first sign to tell us who Jesus is. What it means, as John tells us in the next chapter, is that Jesus came to bring eternal life, the life of the kingdom. He came to bring abundant life. He came that our joy might be full. He

came so that living water might spring up out of us. He came to be the bread from heaven that would fill us up. Jesus didn't come to *save* us from life; he came to *give* us life. Jesus didn't come to take us out of the world so that we could enjoy a party in heaven. Jesus came to bring the party to us.

In Luke 14 Jesus tells the Pharisee he is eating with that what would really make God happy is to invite the *homeless* to dinner—people who could never return the invitation. One of the guests responds with a platitude: “Won't it be wonderful to be at the Messianic banquet in the kingdom of God!” So Jesus tells this story by way of saying, “Yes, it would be wonderful, *if you were going to be there*. But if you're not living in the kingdom now by living a joyful and loving life, what makes you think you'll be there at the end?”

In the story the master who stands for God gets angry at having his invitation to party turned down. Nobody wants to share in his joy. So God says to his servant—who stands for Jesus—“If the ones I invited first don't want to share my joy, then go to ones who have felt left out. If the popular ones don't want me, invite the rejects. If the church people don't want to celebrate with me, invite the sinners. I *will* have a party, and my house *will* be full.” That's how Jesus saw his ministry.

This meal that is set before us is a symbol of the great party of the kingdom of God. It is a wedding feast, and Jesus is the groom. Jesus is also, as Catholics remind us, the host. And Jesus is the messenger who brings the invitation: “Come, all things are ready.” There is nothing that you need to do. Your host has done everything necessary for you to enter into his joy. He has paid the price. All you need to do is to come.