

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 19, 2020

Hymns: 423 – Sing Your Praise to God Eternal; 294 – Hallelujah;

389 – Breathe on me, Breath of God; I Cannot Come to the Banquet

Scripture: Luke 14:15-24

Sermon Title - You're Invited - No Excuses!

*Luke 14:1; 15-24*

*One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching him closely.*

*After Jesus had finished speaking, one of the guests said, "The greatest blessing of all is to be at the banquet in God's kingdom!" Jesus told him:*

*A man once gave a great banquet and invited a lot of guests. When the banquet was ready, he sent a servant to tell the guests, "Everything is ready! Please come."*

*One guest after another started making excuses. The first one said, "I bought some land, and I've got to look it over. Please excuse me."*

*Another guest said, "I bought five teams of oxen, and I need to try them out. Please excuse me."*

*Still another guest said, "I have just gotten married, and I can't be there."*

*The servant told his master what happened, and the master became so angry that he said, "Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame."*

*When the servant returned, he said, "Master, I've done what you told me, and there is still plenty of room for more people."*

*His master then told him, "Go out along the back roads and fence rows and make people come in, so that my house will be full. Not one of the guests I first invited will get even a bite of my food!"*

We're good at making excuses. We're good at coming up with reasons as to why we can't do things, or go somewhere, or make a commitment, or – well, fill in the blank with the 101 things we'd rather not do. Or that we'd rather put off. Or prefer to avoid.

So our reading this morning should be familiar ground for us. Who hasn't ever made an excuse? Who hasn't ever changed plans at the last minute? Or, from the perspective of the host, who hasn't ever held a party or an event to which very few people came, despite their assurances they'd be there?

Jesus tells a story about just such an event. But, typical of Jesus, as he tells the story, he throws us a curveball. The story doesn't work out quite the way we expected.

It all starts out at a dinner party held in Jesus' honour at the home of an important man. A Pharisee, no less. You know the kind of gathering; you're sitting there in front of your plate and you feel like everyone's looking at you and there are three different kinds of forks and two different kinds of spoons and you're surreptitiously watching the person next to you to see which one they use so you don't look like an idiot. All the "right" people are there, and Jesus is poking fun at their self-importance. Then someone makes the pious and polite observation, "*What a blessing it will be to attend the banquet in the Kingdom of God!*"

It's just the right thing to try to get the conversation back to the safe and predictable. But Jesus isn't much for safe and predictable. He uses this otherwise innocuous statement as the intro to our story this morning.

*A man once gave a great banquet and invited a lot of guests. When the banquet was ready, he sent a servant to tell the guests, "Everything is ready! Please come."*

Take note of the fact that the invitations were sent out beforehand. People had plenty of notice. RSVPs were confirmed. Now the day is here, and everything is prepared and ready. Servants are sent out to the invitees. "Come now!" is the message.

This happens today, too. "We're having a number of people over next week for dinner. Can you come?" "Love to. When?" "Sunday afternoon. We'll call you with the exact time." "Great, we look forward to it." The day arrives. The phone rings: "We're all set here. Come on over." But then:

*One guest after another started making excuses. The first one said, "I bought some land, and I've got to look it over. Please excuse me."*

*Another guest said, "I bought five teams of oxen, and I need to try them out. Please excuse me."*

*Still another guest said, "I have just gotten married, and I can't be there."*

The phone rings. "We're all set here. Come on over." "Oh, gee, right, ummmmm (engage random excuse generator). The wife's got a headache. Our

car's on the blink. I've got the swine flu. I just got called in to work." "I thought you were retired?" "Right, I forgot." And so on.

Strange thing is, the excuses in the story Jesus tells happen to be better excuses than these. In fact, the way Jesus tells it, the excuses just happen to be the best possible excuses you could ever come up with. They were, in fact, the only excuses good enough to excuse a person not only from a banquet but from a call to war in that day and age. Let's take a closer look at them – maybe we can use one too someday.

First excuse: *"I bought some land, and I've got to look it over. Please excuse me."*

In Jesus' day, and before, when purchasing land, the buyer had the responsibility after making payment of pacing out the land, marking its boundaries, and claiming it as theirs. Until this was done the transaction was not complete, and the boundaries could be shifted by the seller, the land got shifted and you got shafted. And here's the thing: the Old Testament book of laws, Deuteronomy 20:5-6, gives it as a valid excuse to postpone fighting in a battle. Listen: For today's world: "I just bought a house. We have to do the inspection and sign the papers. It closes at midnight. We just can't come." Good excuse, right? You and I would understand.

Second excuse: *"I bought five teams of oxen, and I need to try them out. Please excuse me."*

Five teams of oxen was a staggeringly large investment. Once the payment was made, the buyer had a full day to run the oxen, ensuring they are without significant problems. After the sun went down, if you had a complaint that one of the oxen was lame, that was your problem. With oxen as a vital part of the plowing and harvest, nothing was more important. For today's world: "I just bought a combine, the field is dry, and it is calling for rain all next week. If I don't harvest now, I might lose it all. Sorry, can't come." Good excuse, right? You and I would understand.

Third excuse: *"I have just gotten married, and I can't be there."*

This fellow just discovered that marriage means, you stop making your own plans. In fact, you stop making decisions altogether. The best answer to the question, "What do you think?" is, "Let me ask my wife." But seriously:

Deuteronomy tells us that a newly married man needs time to “enjoy his wife” before he is called to fight in a war. Hidden behind that polite language is the need to ensure future generations; it is important that the man have the opportunity to father a child before risking death in battle. For today’s world: “I just got married, and we’re on our way out the door to our honeymoon. Sorry, can’t make the dinner.” Good excuse, right? You and I would understand.

Okay, so you got the invitation, but something of tremendous importance has come up, and you need to make your excuses. And your excuses are not the “just washed my hair and can’t do a thing with it,” variety. They are the best excuses. What does the host in our story do?

*The servant told his master what happened, and the master became so angry that he said, “Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame.”*

*When the servant returned, he said, “Master, I’ve done what you told me, and there is still plenty of room for more people.”*

*His master then told him, “Go out along the back roads and fence rows and make people come in, so that my house will be full. Not one of the guests I first invited will get even a bite of my food!”*

The master is enraged. Flies off the handle. Even the best excuses, it seems, won’t do. He fills his banqueting hall with whomever could be found on the street. Vows that the original invitees won’t taste so much as a crumb. No soup for them! Not so much as a leftover.

The moral of the story? God is inviting you to participate in his Kingdom. You had better respond! There’s no excuse that will do. No excuse is good enough.

*“There is a wonderful party,” said Jesus, “and everyone’s invited. There will be food and drink for all. There will be wonderful music. There will be lots of people, young and old. The host is a tremendous guy. It will be the party of a lifetime. The invitations are out, and there is one with your name on it, and all you need to do is accept, and make the time to come.”*

The party is heaven. The host is God. It sounds too good to resist, but lots of people are managing to say “no.” Lots of people are coming up with excuses. “Can’t come,” they say. “No, thanks,” they say. “Too busy. Other important things going on. Prior commitments. Can’t make it. Sorry.”

We all come up with all kinds of wonderful excuses as to why God should just leave us be, why the church needs to take a back seat in our lives. “I’m working hard right now. I’ve got other outside commitments, other pressing engagements. There will be plenty of time for that when I’m older. The kids are involved in a million things. Sunday morning is not a good time for me. I’ll make it next week. Next month. Next year.”

The ominous part of the parable is that when the host receives the refusals – and remember, these were the best excuses of the day - he doesn’t say, “Gee, good excuse. Sorry I interrupted.” No, he says, “I tell you, none of those whom I invited first will eat with me.” When the call comes to come out, to help out, to be involved in this Kingdom-life, what’s your excuse?

I’m reminded of when Dana and I were on a ship touring the Greek Isles and the Biblical sites in Turkey. There were daily excursions. We were told that the ship leaves port at a certain time, and if we’re not on it, we’re not on it. “Excuses don’t matter,” said the Captain. Sure enough, one of the days, a couple missed the boat. Literally. “What happened?” was the question everyone was asking the steward. “Doesn’t matter,” was his response. “Ship goes.” Sometimes, no excuse is good enough. “For some things,” says Jesus in our parable, “no excuse will do.”

But wait a minute. Maybe we’re not the invitees who fail to show. Maybe that’s not us. Maybe we’re the servants, sent out to make the invitation to others. Maybe we’re the servants, sent out into the streets and the alleys, the highways and the byways, with the task of extending the invitation to any and to all. Maybe that’s us. Maybe that’s our role in the Kingdom. But knowing us, I’m afraid the parable might go like this:

*A man once gave a great banquet and invited a lot of guests. When the banquet was ready, he sent a servant to tell the guests, “Everything is ready! Please come.”*

*And the servant said to the master, “I don’t really feel like it. What if they say ‘no?’ What if they think I’m pressuring them to come? It seems like such an effort. How about we just wait to see who happens to wander in? Besides, I’m not so good at inviting. Get somebody else to do it. In the meantime, I get to enjoy the banquet anyway. I’m already here. That’s the main thing.”*

What do you think might be the master’s reaction to that? I think it might be something which involves “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” myself.

But wait a minute. Maybe we're not the invitees. Maybe we're not the servants. Maybe we're the ones who through no virtue of our own are rounded up from hither and yon, spiritually poor and crippled, spiritually blind and lame, and presented with a banquet of unending plenty, with a generous host who freely shares the blessing of the Kingdom with us all. What if that's us?

What do you think might be our reaction to that? I think it might be something which involves unending gratitude, and a determination to reflect and share the Master's hospitality with all.

But wait a minute. Maybe we're not the original excuse-making invitees. Maybe we're not the servants. Maybe we're not even the unworthy beneficiaries. Maybe we're all three. Maybe we, at times, are one; maybe the other.

Maybe at times we find ourselves making excuses, limiting our involvement, rejecting the invitation to come, to participate, to serve. "Thanks, but no thanks," we say. "We've made different priorities. We're doing our own thing."

Maybe at times we find ourselves reluctant to invite others, reluctant to share the Good News, happy to keep what's happening here all to ourselves, content to wait for others to maybe just happen to maybe wander in. "Thanks, but no thanks," we say. "If people want to come, they can find their own way. They can figure it out for themselves."

But maybe at times we actually do get it, we actually do understand, if even for a moment, how wonderful it is to be invited, how wonderful it is to extend that invitation, how wonderful it is that we, unlikely though it may seem, unworthy though we may be, are called to sit at the Master's table, to be part of the Kingdom of God. "Thanks," we say. "Thanks, and a thousand times, thanks." And our lives become a reflection of the Master's generosity, the Master's joy.

Maybe we, at times, are one; maybe the other; maybe all three. But given the choice – and you are given precisely that - which would you rather be?

Won't you respond to God's invitation? Won't you invite others? Won't you come? Amen.