

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 8 & 9, 2012
John Crosby
The Invitational God: God Invites Us
Luke 14:15-24

Let's start with a gift, a gift you don't often have. Let's start with about 90 seconds of silence. I'll speak into that silence and not direct your thoughts but offer you some things to chew on. If it helps you to concentrate, just close your eyes.

Sometimes I feel so close to God. I can feel His presence and His joy and His power, and I'm not afraid. What is that for you? When was the last time you felt close to God, the sight of a child, a beautiful sunset, a walk, the lake, a song, an anthem, a prayer answered? What is it for you? (*Pause.*)

And if I'm honest, *when* I'm honest, there are times that God feels very far away, silent or angry or I wonder—and God seems very far away. When was the last time that happened to you? Was it a boring moment in church? Was it a time of pain? Was it fear? Was it something you said or didn't say, did or didn't do when God seemed so far away? (*Pause.*)

God, my feelings, our feelings, they come and they go. They are not very dependable but if You are going to seem close to us, it will not be because we find You but because You find us, so please, please find us and stay close by.

We are at a place as we begin this new season together where it is helpful, both because we've been scattered for the summer and because there are visitors among us, to talk again about what the essence is of this community. What is the *why* behind what happens at 70th and 100? Could I just suggest that it is about what we just did? That the *why* we are here is so that in some way you might more deeply sense the presence of God and that it would happen together, so that as we sense God's presence, it affects the way we relate to each other. When we leave here, it will be different because we have sensed the presence of God. It is very simple and very difficult at the same time. So to begin our autumn together, we would like to start by talking about the invitational God, the God who is close and comes close, the God we invite other people to, the God who wants us to go out into the world and bring that sense of peace and presence.

How does God come close? How does God invite Himself into our midst? You are here, in part, because you say it's got to have something to do with Jesus. It is always about Jesus. Jesus is God come close to the people in Israel. Somehow in the story Luke tells, it is about Jesus and it is about food. That's good for me. I like that. Do you know that there are more times where food and Jesus come together in the Gospel of Luke than in all the other stories about Jesus combined? There is something about Jesus and parties. When God comes to parties, when Jesus comes to the feast, He changes the party. When God invites us to *His* table, *His* party, it's

a whole different story. It is filled with surprises. So we are going to start with, how does God come to us, how does that happen? If God invites us, how do we respond?

That was on my mind when I was putting this together, and I thought of a time shortly after we came here when Laura and I got an invitation to a friend's party. We didn't know the people very well, but said sure and on that day, because they'd said we'd go to the Country Club, I put on a blazer. I thought I was doing just great. Laura put on this little yellow dress and sandals. She said, "It's my pastor's wife outfit, okay?" We go to our friend's house to be taken to the club and when they open the door, there are four of them not two of them, and the two men are wearing tuxedos and the two women are wearing formal dresses. My wife just turns and looks at me. I had not read the invitation quite thoroughly enough.

It is a fund-raising banquet. The people were graceful, "Oh, it doesn't matter what we wear. You're just fine." They tried to make us feel good. We drove to the country club where there are 500 people in penguin suits and beautiful gowns, and me in my blazer and no tie and my wife in her little yellow pastor's dress and sandals. Really, the only thing I remember about that whole evening is that all through the night, my wife kept pulling me to stand in front of her and looking over my shoulder. For weeks afterwards I had a pain in my kidneys for being punched all night. Invitations are important. It feels great to be invited, but you sort of need to know the ground rules. You don't want to feel out of place.

The feasts that mark the times when Jesus meets with other people are usually invitation only. He is invited someplace. The metaphor that the early church used is that church itself should be a feast where God is the host, but the feasts Jesus went to were often not friendly meals. Sometimes church does not feel very friendly to people when they are invited and are not sure what they should wear. One of these feasts is found in Luke, chapter 14, and it starts out this way.

14 One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ² There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body.

It is doubtful to me, by the way, that Jesus was just walking into the house and all of a sudden, there in front of him was a guy suffering from a swollen body. No, what happened was that the host made sure that this was an interruption that Jesus could not ignore. It says, "He was being carefully watched."

³ Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" ⁴ But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.

We have not even gotten through the door yet and we realize that this is not a friendly meal. It is not a friendly place. The sick man is a trap. He is in some ways a door pass. The fine print on the invitation does not say *tuxedos only*. The fine print says *no healing on the Sabbath. Come to church and be a good boy*. The invitation is sent by the head of the Sin Patrol. Too often the people of God are seen as the Sin Patrol, the ones who decide what's wrong and what's right, and they make sure they keep the wicked far away. That's the Pharisees. Well, I think that God's feast, God's church, should not be a test. It should be an invitation to a feast, and you

should be able to dress as you are. As a matter of fact, it should be the place to see God as God is, so the attention is not on what you're wearing but on what God is doing. God wants to free us from the bondage of sin, that is, the distance between the me I want to be, the me I'm supposed to be, and the me I really am. God wants to free us from that and forgive us and help us live the life we have always wanted. That's the life that God wants for us. Evil and good, right and wrong are important, but too often the church treats the symptoms with a list of right and wrong and acts like the Sin Patrol, and it is not a very friendly feast. Who would want to go? Would God go to that feast? Jesus gets in, and it says in verse 7,

⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

When God is invited to the feast, He says, "It's not about who's cool and who's not, who's spiritual and who's not, who's made spiritual progress and who hasn't. It's about whether you respond and walk into the feast. Here's a place where I think we can get in trouble in this church. Our big signal is grace is everything. You are welcome no matter where you are and at the same time, what's your next step? How do you grow? I believe in spiritual growth. I believe that people who have come to the living God should not be the same 20 years later as they are the day before they met God, but I also believe that comparisons kill. Comparing ourselves to other people kills them and hurts us. Are we going to provide the kind of feast where God is present or is it going to be a little stair step ladder—come and see whether you fit? If you're on the bottom rung, watch out. If you're near the top, feel pretty good about yourself. Jesus doesn't seem to like that kind of feast. As He looks around, He sees something else.

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

So the feast of God where God comes and sits with God's people is not complete unless there are the poor, the crippled, the blind, the naked, and the lame right there in the center. Now may I say, I think this is a concern for us in our success. We say that we want to inspire all generations to follow Jesus, love others, and live missionally. I think we are doing pretty well on the love others. I think with over a thousand people in small groups, many of you know one another. With all kinds of support groups, many of you feel cared for, with hospital visitation and what I think is the best atmosphere in the Twin Cities. This is a great place to have a funeral, folks, whether you are a member or a guest. We love one another in the hard times and celebrate well in the good times.

The reason for my concern is that churches over time always fight being inward focused,

especially the successful ones because we have created a community, a real community where we love one another, where we care about each other. I can't wait to hear more of your summer's story. And what happens is, those who aren't in the circle feel left out of the circle and over time, it becomes all about us and the people who look like us. When God offers the feast, He says that's not the way it should look. You should have among you the constant surprises, how did I get here? How did I get invited to this place? I long for that kind of community, for one that seeks the real God and doesn't have to pretend to be good, for a place where I'm included in a group of people and don't have to compare myself to others, where there is always fellowship around the table and an empty seat right next to me for the next person who is supposed to be invited in. I crave that, and I'm not alone. When Jesus says, "This isn't the way it's supposed to be. Invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, the blind," a guy at the table right next to Him says, "That's it. That's what I want! Then Jesus says, "Blessed are the ones who will sit at that feast in the Kingdom of God."

How do you get there? How do you get to that kind of place? Frankly, I think you need help. Since of all four of our worship services, I think this is the most intelligent one, and I will not say that again for another 47 minutes, so since you are the most intelligent group, would you do me a favor. I'm not going to embarrass anybody, I promise, and this will be over in less than a minute. Would you all please stand?

David Ramsey offers this simple test where everyone needs to close their eyes. Everybody just close your eyes. That's not the hard part yet. Now raise your right hand. Everybody keep your eyes closed and just raise your right hand. Now in the next seven seconds, point to where north is. Everybody point north. Okay. Freeze. Now you can open your eyes. Everybody look around. I see people pointing in every direction. I think some are even pointing up towards the sky. The truth is, when asked, unprepared, to demonstrate, not many of us know which direction true north is. Okay, have a seat.

Ramsey calls this the true north test. What is true north? Is it a matter of opinion? No, true north is a constant. It does not change. It has been used for centuries as a way to gauge where we are and how to get where we want to be. If we close our eyes and rely solely on our own understanding, we may have trouble getting to the feast of the people of God. We may never get there unless we know how to get where we want to be and for that we need a guide.

Jesus spent the first half of this story, telling people how this feast that He has been invited to is not where God is because it is the Sin Patrol's party. It is the prideful people's party. It is the just-our-kind party. God may show up but will probably not feel welcome. Then Jesus, the guide, says, "How do you get to the feast of the Kingdom of Heaven?"

¹⁵ When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

¹⁶ Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.

¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

¹⁹ “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

²⁰ “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

They all had good excuses, but none of them showed up at the feast. How do you get to the feast of King Jesus? You realize the excuses that keep you away from the feast of King Jesus. One of my friends has a friendship with a younger woman, and this friendship has grown around food and their friends and families and just caring for one another. My friend recently wrote my wife Laura a note saying, “Hey, look, this woman wants to talk about spiritual things, and I’m not sure I have the right answers. Would you give me some help?” She had obviously written a note to her friend, and the response of the young woman was this. “As to visiting CPC, you and I need to have more discussions about my either realistic or too cynical belief that no organized religion or church is offering a truly Christian experience. My definition of Christian is somebody living a loving life, caring deeply for themselves and every other person on this planet as well as for the other living creatures and the planet itself. My version of God is not of a punisher but a God who always offers forgiveness for those who are willing to change.”

She is not going to come to the feast until she feels a need and sees a difference. All the people in Jesus’ story had good reasons to keep them away from the feast. They were busy doing things that they felt better about than going to the feast. My sense is that the people for whom life is going well, who have an explanation for the universe where all seems to fit are not the ones hungry to come to the feast. It is not until the pain or the failure or the sin or the being let down or the confusion whacks us upside the head that we go, “There must be something else.” Then we are ready to hear the invitation. So I think at the right time, this young woman may very well be much more open to coming than she would be otherwise, but only if—the other part of it, people don’t come because they’ve got excuses. People don’t come to the feast because they do not see a difference. They see many people in church who are making excuses just like theirs. They have come to the feast but are not following Jesus. Many of the people in church come, but they make excuses, too. “Jesus, I’d really like to follow You, but my boyfriend is going to leave if I don’t move in with him.” “Jesus, I know, I know. But I need this job. It took so long to get it.” “I can’t say what I really think.” “Jesus, I’d love to give more time to serve God’s children, but it’s just not the right time.” “God, I’d like to, but—”

God is calling each one of you now, not later. Now! And it is imperative for you to ask, “Am I going,” whether it’s just to go to class or to work or to a circle or to a friend’s house, “Am I going to follow Jesus there or am I going to find an excuse?” because it will affect your walk with God. And it will not only affect your walk, it will affect the walk of the people who are checking the feast out as well. When people look at this feast, do they see a God calling us now and us following? **The first mark of how to get to the feast of King Jesus is that there are no excuses** on our RSVPs. People don’t say, “Sorry, too busy.” They come.

The second mark is counterintuitive. **I believe that the feast only happens when the room is filled with all the wrong people.** “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.” But they didn’t come.

²¹ “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

Collect everyone who looks like they need a square meal, all the misfits, all the homeless, all the wretched that you can get your hands on and bring them here. If you want to look for where the feast of heaven is, look for the people that God has a passion for that no one else has time for, the least, the lost, and the left behind, and see if you can find followers of Jesus around those people. *There* is the feast of heaven.

I think we do okay with that and better all the time, reaching out to the least, the lost, and the left behind. In some ways that's safer. I've got to tell you, though, I think that what Jesus is talking about here is not just the poor but the marginalized in our community, not just the needy in Africa but the folks who are damaged and awkward, the ones around us who are difficult or angry or fearful or prideful. We say to ourselves, "God could not mean *them*." God may very well mean *them*. And just so you don't think I'm not included, my wife and I were just yesterday exchanging emails saying, "You know that couple we know in a non-church setting, that couple that always sits by themselves," Laura said, "we really ought to try to spend some time with them." And I said to my wife, "Oh, honey, I'd like to but I'm afraid if we did, they've got no friends, they would just glom onto us,"—but that is a sermon for another day. This is about what God wants to say to *you*, not about what God wants to say to *me*. Will the feast be filled with the wrong kind of people? Back to Luke 14.

²² "‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’"

²³ "Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.’"

²⁴ "I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

The third mark I got out of Luke 14 that I think you get to the Kingdom of God and eat at the feast of King Jesus is this: When the servant returns, the master says, "**Go out again. Bring them. Invite them until they come.**" You look around and it looks as though we are doing well and, I need to say this the right way, but this is not about more butts in the pews and more bucks in the plate, using theological language to the core. This is not about more bodies and more dollars. This is about the idea that we did not stumble in here. God brought us in here. Someone invited us in here, and there are many more out there. There are sheep missing the feast, and the Shepherd is sending you to look for those people. There are wolves out there. There are junior high kids who would love to be in our midweek program, but there are wolves out there telling them it's not cool. There are people who would love to be invited to Edynamoos but are not there because they have not been invited. There are folks in loneliness who look neat on the outside but would love to be invited to your small group. The master told the servant, "Go out into the roads and lanes and make them come in so that my house will be full."

Will we be servants who will go out again? What's your excuse? What if we were a church where instead of making excuses about our boyfriend having us move in, or our job being too dangerous to tell the truth, or our desire not to get over involved, what if instead of the excuses, we followed Jesus to the feast? What would God do then?

About 12 years ago because of you, because of this church, I was invited to be on the board of World Vision and had the privilege of serving as a director. About three years ago I rotated off, I term-limited off, and was invited onto the international board. But before I left, they gave each of

the outgoing board members something to remind us of serving, a statue of King Jesus. It sits on my desk, and I look at it every day. When I am confused about my life being about personnel committee meetings or finance meetings or theology classes or whatever fills my schedule these days, I look at the statue of King Jesus. He's gone out into the fields and found a kid already. He's holding onto a loaf of bread that people are dying to have. King Jesus reminds me why I have been given the privilege of coming to this feast. I pray that He will remind you as well.

Lord Jesus, I thank You very much for this uncomfortable story of the God who makes invitations again and again to come to grace and love and life. I pray that my brothers and sisters here will read the invitation carefully enough that they will put their excuses behind and that they will not come back alone. I thank You that the feast goes on and on. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.