

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
July 29 & 30, 2017
Petey Crowder
Block Party: The Great Banquet | Luke 14**

If you weren't around last week I'll probably need to introduce myself. I'm Petey Crowder and I just came on staff as Pastor of Adult Ministries. I'm excited to be here with you this morning! I also wanted you to meet my family, so I have a picture here. Ashley is my wife, and Emery and Yeni are my daughters—they're 10 and 7. They're the best family in the world—I mean I'm sure your families are great too—and Forest the dog, who goes one way or another depending on the day. My family is right here and I'd love for you to meet them, and we look forward to getting to meet you as well. Now, when Ashley and I first got married, before we had kids, we'd been married a whole two weeks before we moved across the country. We had been living in Alabama and we moved to Corvallis, Oregon, which is western Oregon, for the first ministry assignment of my career. We had been there for a while and we were leaving church one summer day when we ran into some friends, and started a conversation. Now, they were just a little older than us, they were married, they had their first kid—a one year old baby girl—and we hatched a random plan to get in the car that afternoon and drive to Alabama. So the five of us, four adults and a baby, get into our car and we start driving, and we don't spend the night anywhere. We drive straight for over a day and a half until we get to eastern Alabama; it's a long trip. I have lots of little stories, but I'll spare you those...anyway, we spent two weeks in Alabama and then we started to drive back. We realized as we were driving that we would be hitting St. Louis on the night of July 4. This was before smart phones, but we thought surely we could find fireworks in St. Louis on the night of the 4th. So we pull into town around dusk, find a place to park, and realize there is a Hootie and the Blowfish concert happening underneath the arch. Kids, you can look that up later, what that is. There were massive fireworks—it was just amazing. One of the most memorable Fourth of July celebrations we have ever had in our lives. We found ourselves unexpectedly included in this really unexpected party.

This morning we are finishing our series called "Block Party" where we're looking at Jesus showing up at parties and interacting in somewhat radical ways with people and showing them the love and grace of God. What we find this morning in our text is that Jesus tells a parable about unexpected guests being included unexpectedly at a party. We'll look at that this morning, and I think what happens for us sometimes is that we find ourselves unexpectedly presented in life with the opportunity to spend time with people at parties, at celebrations, in every day ways, and that Jesus may be calling us to respond to other people in ways we might sometimes miss because we aren't paying attention. My hope is, as we look at this text, we might see what it looks like to show up

at a party with Jesus and what Jesus might be calling us to as we do such a thing. Our text is in the 14th chapter of Luke, starting in verse 15. Let me set it up. Jesus is sitting at a table with a bunch of Pharisees. Like John said last week, Pharisees were the serious people. They were sort of the religious elite of the nation of Israel, of the Jewish people. They were very serious, they were very pious, and they took themselves and their religion very, very seriously. But Jesus did not always take them so seriously and He has just said something at the table that is very confrontational and there's an awkward silence that follows. Some of you know that when there's an awkward silence in a social situation some people think it's a good idea to try to break the silence by saying something—no, none of you are ever those people—and this is actually what happens in our text...awkward silence and then verse 15:

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

Pause right there. That probably sounds pretty foreign to us, but this man is making a theological statement, this big statement that everyone at the table could agree upon. He knew this statement would go over very well with the religious people at the table who Jesus has just frustrated and offended. It's kind of like if you were in downtown Minneapolis at a restaurant or a bar, and there started to be something that got out of control and someone tried to ease the tension by saying, "Go Vikings!" Right? We could all get behind that; maybe that will solve the problem. Let's say something we can all agree on. And that's what's happened here in this text. So Jesus responds. Verse 16:

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.'

Pause right there again. This would have been the second invitation. In their culture they sent out an initial invitation, said the party is coming in a few days or a few weeks, and people would agree to come...there was a headcount so the master would know how much food to prepare, how many goats to slaughter, etc. And then the food is ready, so they sent the master out to say *Come! The food is now ready*. That's what was happening here. Verse 18:

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.'

Now, those might sound like reasonable excuses to you, because I'll personally admit I have found myself trying to get out of a social situation I wasn't thrilled about, right? But we'll see in just a minute these are very lame excuses. Very lame excuses. And so this parable continues. Verse 21:

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.’
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.

And then our best understanding of this text is this next line, verse 24. Actually Jesus turns back to the serious, religious folks around Him and says,

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

So, if you’ve learned nothing else from this series, I hope you have at least learned that when Jesus shows up at a party, anything can happen. Everything is fair game. He might say or do something completely off the wall to really mix up the party. And at this table in our text, this man—maybe he’s the host—is just trying to diffuse an awkward situation by saying something he thought everyone could agree with. *Yeah, we can all agree. Good idea.* So, the great banquet that he’s talking about is a reference to the book of Isaiah where there is an image of God’s people being triumphant, and that’s what he is saying. “Yeah, we can all feast at the great banquet. Wahoo!” And instead Jesus goes, “Oh, you want to talk about a banquet? Let me tell you a story about a banquet.” And I’m sure the man regretted what he said the moment this took off.

Jesus uses this very image of a banquet to challenge them and to challenge us on what life is really about, especially life when you know and walk with God—the God who created us and loves us. When Jesus shows up at a party, anything can happen, so we better be ready. Things can happen, such as when Jesus shows up at a party, and we have to hold loose to our ideas of what success looks like.

Several months ago we were living in North Carolina, and I got—I’ll say tricked—I got tricked into being on an Earth Day panel on religion and the environment. This is not my forte. So there I am in this massive facility, the fairgrounds in Winston-Salem, North Carolina for an Earth Day fair, wedged into a corner—there were four of us, a mom, a priest, a rabbi and myself. We had microphones and there was a moderator asking us questions. The first question she asks is, “Tell us what your faith text says about the world, about the earth, about creation.” And I thought, *Well that’s easy. I can talk about God making the earth, making it good and that He loves us. I can say all these wonderful, beautiful things.* And she says, “We will let the rabbi go first.” Do any of you see why that’s a problem? He says exactly what I’m going to say, but he uses a lot more eloquent words, talks about the Hebrew, he goes in depth...it’s beautiful. And I’m like, “Yeah. I agree!” And then they hand me the microphone, and I don’t know what to say because he just said everything I was going to say. I had to completely re-evaluate what my idea of success looked like in that moment.

And so in our parable today, the man who is throwing a party is being challenged on his idea of what a successful party and a successful life look like. So think about for

yourself. What would make a party successful? Kids, all the kids in the audience, what would make a party successful? I think for many of us it's just that our friends and the people we want to show up actually come and that they have a good time. Like that's the baseline for a good party. And for this man, in an ancient near-eastern culture, a successful banquet would mean that everybody who was somebody in his town would come—all the influential people would show up, they would have a great time, and then in the future when they threw parties, he would get invited. That's how their social world worked. This is similar to the way our social world works today. And so he's throwing a party, and he has this amazing guest list. Everybody who he wants to come...all the right people are coming. And then when the invitation goes out, they all start to make excuses. And Jesus' table audience would have known right away that these are the worst excuses. Jesus picks lame, awkward, embarrassing, offensive excuses so that everyone at the table would know that's an awful excuse. So for whatever reason in this story, all of the guests in the town have decided to collude against the master and to say *we are going to embarrass him and ostracize him and alienate him*. There is this sneaky injustice that is happening against the master. The question at that point of the story is how will he respond? And I even ask you to consider how would you respond if you had thrown this party and all the guests, rather than coming, decide they're going to work together to embarrass you. How would you respond? So, we are going to get to his response in just a minute, but what I want you to see is Jesus is using this idea of what makes a successful party in their culture to challenge their ideas of what a successful life looks like. There is irony in this story because this is the nation of Israel, and even in Israel, no one would have thrown a party and invited people that couldn't mutually benefit them. That's ironic because the nation only exists because God one day came to a wandering, homeless Aramaic man named Abram and said, "I will bless you. I will give you land, and you will then be a blessing to the whole world and the whole world will know who God is and what God is like and what God's blessings are like because I have blessed you." That was how God would define success for His people. But instead, the way they lived life together as a nation basically said *God is like us and looks like us and talks like us and acts like us, and if you aren't like us, and don't talk like us, and don't think like us, and don't act like us, you can't benefit us and you're not welcome at God's table*. That was never God's plan for His people, and so Jesus is challenging them to rethink what success might look like, both as they threw parties and as they lived their lives, as they spent time with others and as they walked with God in the world—what might it look like to live successful lives?

The second thing I want you to see is that when Jesus shows up at a party, He wants us to make the most out of the life we have been given. I don't want to point any fingers, but have you ever met somebody who is really talented and gifted, and they know it, but they are also really needy about it? Right? They always need someone to tell them they are doing a good job or they will just fall apart. I think about some pitchers I played baseball with who were just phenomenal at pitching, but the moment they had a rough patch they would completely fall apart, or the moment the coach yelled at them, they would completely go to shambles and they'd be no good as a pitcher anymore.

This is kind of what's happening with the Pharisees at the table. They've been included, they've been blessed, they are God's people, and yet they are spending their whole lives trying to prove that they belong at the table. They just constantly want affirmation—*yes, we belong at the table*. They can't enjoy the benefits of being God's people and having God's blessings because they just want more. How many of us spend so much of our time wanting more, going after more, or whatever it is, that we can't enjoy what we've been given?

So, back to our parable. The man is throwing a party, and all of the important people in the town have said *we're going to embarrass you*. They've declared with their actions *Hey man, you don't belong*. And so what does he do? He could take it as an opportunity to prove them wrong, to demonstrate *No, I am influential. I am important. I am powerful*. He could get back at them; he could try to get justice, but instead there is this moment in the text where everything changes. He doesn't sulk over what he doesn't have, he realizes *I have been blessed immensely. I have a party and it is ready to throw*. And he enters into the story of others—those who are outside of him—and blesses them. This is in direct contrast to the people sitting around the table with Jesus. They have been blessed; the Pharisees have been blessed, but rather than using that blessing to bless others, they've made it primarily about themselves. So, rather than fretting over what we don't have, can we trust that we have enough? Can we trust that God has blessed us and that He is faithful? When Jesus has done something incredible in your life, something beautiful—big or small—can we trust that our calling is simply to boldly extend that blessing into the world around us, and that God will continue to provide for us and hold a seat for us at the table?

The last thing I want you to see in the text is this: when Jesus shows up at a party, we will start to see unexpected things we didn't see before. There is a story in the Old Testament in the book of 1 Samuel, Chapter 16. The nation of Israel has their very first king, his name is Saul, and it's not going too well, so God goes to a prophet named Samuel and says, "Samuel, I want you to go to a town called Bethlehem and seek out a man named Jesse. One of his sons is going to be the next king." So Samuel goes, he meets Jesse, and Jesse brings out his oldest son who is tall and handsome and broad-shouldered, and Samuel thinks *that's the king!* And God says *nope, that's not the king*. So Jesse keeps bringing out his sons and they get considerably less impressive as it goes, and every time God says *nope, not the king*. So Samuel, in his frustration, says *do you have any other kids?* And Jesse says *yeah, I have one son. He's the youngest, he's the runt. He's out in the field*. And Samuel says *well, bring him in*. And so David comes in and he's been in the field and he's dirty and he's small and he's young, and God says *that's the king*. And Samuel is like *God, I don't understand*. And God says *that's because you look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart*. God looks at the heart. You see, when all we look at is the outside, the exterior, we get what we see. There is nothing there but what we're looking at, but when we learn to look deeper, when we listen to people's stories, when we take time to get to know them, we start to see what God sees—the heart, what's underneath, who people really are, what they really need. And what we learn from our text, and what we learn from all other scripture, is that God sees those who we are often tempted to overlook. Not intentionally; it's just

not on our radar. We don't see what God sees. It reminds me of a story of the early church. In the fourth century there were these church leaders called the Cappadocians and they were in the area of what we might now call modern Turkey. There was a severe famine that was afflicting the poor, and they would preach to their congregations, particularly the rich in their churches, and they were known for giving these sermons that in grotesque and vivid detail, described the plight of the poor. And there is a line from a man named Saint Gregory that stands out in particular. He said, "These [the poor] are our brothers in Christ, whether you like it or not." It strikes me; it should strike all of us, right? He was trying to get his church to see what Jesus was trying to get those at the table to see, which is that God sees what we don't see. God knows what we don't know. We are being called to develop eyes and hearts that see what God sees, to enter into the stories of those who we are often tempted to overlook, and to see that those who are not like us have just as much a right to be included in God's table and God's party as we do, because God sees them how He sees all of us; He sees us in need of a savior.

When Jesus sits down at tables, and when He parties and when He heads to the cross, the message is that God knows you, He sees you, and God loves you. Through His death and through His resurrection, Jesus extends to us unexpected invitations to come and sit at His table, and we should know there is room for all of us and we can come just as we are; we don't have to earn our way and we can leave and never be the same. Remember, when Jesus shows up at a party, anything can happen, and this is still true today because for those who claim Jesus as their Lord and savior, Christ lives in us. When you show up at parties big and small, Jesus shows up through you, and this Jesus does theology every bit as much at a party as He ever does in a synagogue. What He wants us to know is how we treat others says a ton about who we believe God is and how we believe that God sees them. So, when you show up at a party, or just in the everyday lives of others, my prayer is that you would also notice that Jesus shows up and that you would learn to respond in ways that say and demonstrate they are welcome at God's party.

When the parable ends, we are left with two tables. The first table is the actual table where Jesus sits. It is surrounded by Pharisees and it is shrouded with religious insecurity, and performance, and judgmental status seekers who are always trying to measure up. And then there is a second table. It is the table at the end of the parable that Jesus tells. When Jesus brings people to the table of God, walls come down, strangers find themselves included, God's grace and hospitality is extended far beyond imagination, and people learn that they have more than enough. Which table are you going to sit at today? Let's pray.

Holy and loving God, we thank You and praise You for all that You have blessed us with, for the grace that You have demonstrated to us, for the ways in which You have loved us, for the party that You have thrown, and the way You have included us at Your table. I pray for every single person sitting in this room, that they would know they are loved by You, that they would understand Your invitation to the table that comes without hindrance and without restrictions, and

that we can come just as we are. And for those of us sitting here who need encouragement for what it looks like for us to walk with Jesus, to walk with Your son in everyday life, may we find rest, knowing that it's not about trying, it's just about following You into our neighborhoods, into our parties, into our families, and into our workplaces. God, You are good. You are good beyond imagination. May we know that, and may we affirm that with everything that we are. We love You and praise You. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 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.