

Our Gospel text starts off with a man declaring, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” It’s a bit of an odd, even seemingly-random statement thrown into the conversation. And when you consider the context, it gets even more interesting.

At the beginning of Luke 14, Jesus is invited to a dinner party by a ruler of the Pharisees. Perhaps his host was hoping for polite, if rather empty, conversation with this up-and-coming rabbi. But Jesus, who always speaks the truth even if it upsets people, is far from empty in his conversation.

The chapter, and the conflict, starts off with Jesus pointing out the hypocrisy and heartlessness of the guests in thinking that healing a man on the Sabbath was against God’s Law. Then Jesus points out their prideful behaviors in attempting to elevate themselves by choosing the best places at the table. He then tells his host that he shouldn’t invite just other rich people to his feasts, but the poor, the crippled, those who cannot return the favor.

It’s at this point one of the guests pipes up with “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” It’s like that point at Thanksgiving dinner when the conversation is getting heated, probably about religion or politics, that someone will throw out a line to try to steer the conversation back to a more polite, if rather empty, topic. “How about those Broncos, huh?” “Been pretty cold lately, hasn’t it?” “Isn’t the pumpkin pie wonderful?” Polite, if rather empty.

“Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” He’s probably hoping that everyone will agree, “Yes, yes, that will be good, blessed for sure, etc.” But Jesus’ words are never empty, even if they are considered by their hearers to be “impolite.” The Lord takes this declaration and uses it to teach the essential, if upsetting, truth about just who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God. And His words aren’t just for those Pharisees and lawyers at the dinner party, but also for His Church today.

So who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God? Jesus answers this by telling a parable. A Master of a house invites many to a great banquet. And when the time comes, He sends His servants to tell the guests (who would have RSVP’d yes) that everything was ready. Come to the feast!

But then, as Jesus tells, “they all alike began to make excuses.” All of them came up with reasons why they couldn’t come. “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.” “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.” “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” Excuse after excuse after excuse.

Now maybe at first glance the excuses seem valid. Perhaps the people giving them even believed them. We are to take care of our possessions, to be good stewards of what God has given to us. And marriage is certainly important. But at closer examination, all these excuses fall apart.

For one, the invitation would have been sent long in advance, and so people had plenty of time to set their schedules. For another, the field, the oxen, and wife aren’t going anywhere. The first two have been purchased already, and the wife would probably enjoy attending a great feast with her husband.

But valid or not, believed or not, the excuses all show something in common. Whatever the excuse was, it was more important to the person than the feast to which the Master had invited them. Fields, oxen, and wives were all placed above the great banquet which they had agreed to attend. And in snubbing the feast, they were snubbing the Master who gave it.

We'll pause there in the parable and ask how did this apply to the people to whom Jesus originally told it – the Jews. They, the physical descendants of Abraham, had been promised that through them, the Messiah would be given, the Messiah who would save humanity. The Lord promised to Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The Lord continued to uphold this promise, speaking it through Moses and the Prophets. The invitation was sent out, repeatedly.

And at first, the people all agreed to it. When Moses read the covenant and sprinkled the blood of that covenant on them, they all promised to keep it. This was them promising to attend that great Messianic feast whenever the it came, and to live their lives as the Lord had directed them, so that they would be ready when it arrived.

Yet as the years went on, the people found more and more distractions, more and more excuses. Why wait for the Messiah's feast, when the gods of the pagans around them were holding feasts then and there, feasts that appealed much more to the lusts of the flesh?

And it was taking so long, so why not devote themselves to getting more land, more oxen, more wealth, even though they had to take it from their brothers? And why remain so exclusive – or reclusive, as they saw it – in marrying just within the people of God? Surely a foreign wife wouldn't distract a man from the Messianic feast when it arrived – so thought Solomon.

The Lord sent his servants the prophets to call the people to repent, but they were usually ignored, or worse.

And so, finally, when the Messiah does come, the people are so distracted that they don't even realize it. This is seen, in fact, in the statement made by our dinner guest. Again, He says, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God." Will eat – in the future.

When the final servant – John the Baptist – had come to tell the invited guests that the feast was then ready, he said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Kingdom was there, now! John had told the Pharisees when they came out to examine him that, "Among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." The Messiah was there!

That Messiah, Jesus, would direct His disciples to declare, when He sent them out the first time, "Heal the sick... and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" The Kingdom of God is present in Jesus.

But even the Pharisees and lawyers at this dinner party, who were supposed to be the teachers of Israel, the experts in the Scriptures, didn't see it. They wanted a great and worldly kingdom, a Messiah who would throw out the Romans and give them their "Promised Land" back, and so when Jesus didn't do this, they threw Him to the Romans, oblivious to the fact that His crucifixion opened the doorway to the eternal Promised Land, to the everlasting Kingdom in paradise.

But of course this doesn't apply only to those dinner guests of Pharisees and lawyers. These are words that we need to hear today as well. Like those Jews, we, the New Testament people of God, are just as tempted to ignore His invitation.

That invitation is first given to us in Holy Baptism, where God puts His divine name on us and makes us His children. There's no greater invitation that you can have to a great feast than being the beloved child of the man hosting it!

And furthermore, the Lord sends forth His Word, inspired by His Spirit, saying to His people, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Week after week, the Lord invites you to hear Him speak His words of peace and comfort to you. Week after week, the Lord invites you to eat bread in the Kingdom of God, the bread of heaven, His own body, given for you.

In this new covenant we are in, the Lord not only sends invitations, but even foretastes, measures of the feast itself, to those invited.

And how are we tempted to respond to the invitation to our Master's great, even miraculous feast? Come, hear God speak through His servant and tell you that, whatever you have done, you are forgiven, made at peace with Him by the blood of His own Son! "That's nice and all, but I'm kinda tired this morning, so no."

Come, listen to the Word of God, by which He drives out demons, transforms hearts, calls people of all tribes and tongues and nations, grants wisdom and understanding surpassing anything in this world! "Okay, but I heard it a couple weeks ago, so I'm probably still okay."

Come, sing the praises of God with the words that God has given, praises that are echoed by the great choirs of angels and archangels, sung by the great white-robed host around the throne of the Lamb! "That sounds neat, but have you ever watched people hit balls into holes in the ground, or throw them through a hoop?"

Come, let God feed you with His actual body and actual blood, which He brings to us by tearing the veil between heaven and earth! Hold Jesus – the Lord who holds the universe in His hand – in Your hands, hidden so that the overwhelming glory and splendor don't drive you out of your mind! "That's nice, but I really like being out with the trees, because they're nice, too."

Come, have the blessing of God Most High placed upon you, the same blessing He gave to Aaron and his sons, the blessing that is yours in Christ, so that whatever happens in the coming week, you know that the Lord, Yahweh, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is looking upon you with favor and granting you peace! "Nah. Maybe another week."

It sounds ridiculous, because if we don't laugh at it, then we're left to realize just how great we are sinning when we are able to come to church – not sick, not snowed in, not home-bound – able, but actively choose to do something else instead. If we believe, actually believe, what God tells us in His Word about what happens in His Church when we gather in His name, then our excuses are even worse, even more foolish, than those in the parable.

And what did happen to those who, in the parable, gave excuses? The Master says, "For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet." None of those men in the parable.

None of those Jews who trusted in their descent from Abraham rather than the faith of Abraham in the coming Messiah. None of those who call themselves Christians who think that, because they were baptized, or confirmed, or are on a membership list somewhere, they don't actually need to daily repent of their sins and seek to live as the Lord desires of them.

The Master's house will be filled, and those who repent and believe, who trust in the mercy of Christ, He will bring in, no matter how poor or crippled or blind or lame they may be, no matter how far out into the highways and hedges He has to go to bring them in. But to those who refuse... Jesus speaks here dire words of warning.

These words of warning, this parable, are directed at the Church, and at different people within the Church. The first who need to hear this parable are pastors. Pastors need to hear it, because they need to be reminded of their role as those who publicly stand in the stead of Christ and who carry out their work at His command. We need to hear how Jesus speaks, if we are to speak His words to His people.

Especially, pastors – I myself – need to hear Jesus resist the temptation to just speak polite, if empty, words, for the sake of not upsetting anyone. Jesus didn't walk into that dinner party and start insulting and yelling and going on a tirade.

But neither did He just look the other way when there was a man with dropsy, or stay silent when He saw how people were pridefully choosing prominent seats, or lamely agree that those who would eat bread in the Kingdom of God would be blessed. He doesn't "Awe shucks," "Gee whiz," or nervously chuckle His way through this dinner. He says what needs to be said, even if by the end of this dinner most of the guests are infuriated with Him. The words of Jesus are polite, but they are never empty.

The words of a pastor are to be polite, but they must not be empty. We pastors must not ignore the problems that come up, even when addressing them will almost certainly make someone mad.

Jesus loved everyone at that dinner. He loved them perfectly. He loved them so much that He was willing to make them angry at Him so that they might repent and be with Him in the Kingdom of God forever.

Pastors – we are to love you all with that love of Jesus, to love you so that we don't let our desire to be liked become a stumbling block to your salvation. May God grant that I don't have reasons to speak such unpleasant words to any of you – because I certainly don't enjoy it and would much rather have joy and peace – but if I do, know that I speak them in the love that Christ has given me for you.

In addition to pastors, this parable also applies to every Christian, every layman and laywoman. Jesus is here reminding you that the Third Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy," is a Commandment of God, not a neat idea or helpful suggestion.

To skip worship when you are able to go is a sin, one that God takes very seriously, because it works to separate you from Him and the divine gifts He wishes to give to you. It harms your soul and over time destroys your faith by starving it to death.

And so, when you fall into it, repent, and know that the blood of Jesus washes it away. When you are tempted to skip church to do other things, pray for strength to resist that temptation, and then also seek ways to gather together with God's saints, either here or at another faithful congregation if you're out of town. As your pastor, I'm here to help you find those places, those fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, as you're out traveling those highways and hedges.

Finally, Jesus speaks this parable to you so that when you encounter fellow Christians who have fallen into this sin, you may have confidence as you call them to return, because you'll be speaking the words of Jesus Christ Himself.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." That Kingdom is not something far off, some distant heaven that maybe we'll get to someday. No, the Kingdom of God is here, among you, because Jesus, the King, comes to His gathered people and reigns in their midst. Who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God to come? Those who eat it now, with Jesus, in His Kingdom here on earth.

In the name of Jesus, amen.