

## **Taking Your Seat – Luke 14:15-24**

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

**April 6, 2025**

As our Lenten series on “Meeting Jesus at the Table” continues, let’s look back for a moment at some of the ideas we’ve explored in the last few weeks.

In the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes on the hillside, we saw how he does incredible things within the context of people being hungry. He creates something useful and nourishing out of nothing.

In the story of Jesus eating with Matthew and the other tax collectors, we learned how Jesus didn’t shy away from going into the lions’ den, so to speak, to generate community and build bridges.

In the story of the woman invading a meal at the Pharisee’s home, she shows her gratitude to Jesus by wiping his tear-stained feet with her hair and lavishing him with an expensive perfume.

And last week, after weeks of emphasizing how everyone has a place at Jesus’ table, we were reminded that it’s not only making sure everyone is invited but that exalting others rather than ourselves is played out by the seats we are willing to take at the table—giving up seats of prominence and choosing the lower place.

Today, the narrative of Luke 14 continues, where Jesus is still eating at the home of the Pharisee. He’s finished his parable of where to sit at the table and who needs to be invited (the poor and the disabled as much if not more than friends and rich relatives). And now Jesus shifts to another parable.

Almost in the same breath, he shares this story of a banquet host inviting all these people to his banquet, and many of them decide not to come. They have a myriad of excuses. One just purchased some property and had to go see it. Another had just bought some new oxen and had to go try them out. And a third had just gotten married and couldn't attend.

And so the host then goes and invites people off the streets to join him for his party, including the poor and disabled.

And he couldn't find enough people to take the seats he was offering at his banquet.

This past Wednesday night, some members of my family and I went to a concert in Nashville. We had purchased the tickets, of course, for the show a good while back at the hefty price that many concert tickets go for.

When we arrived at the venue, we discovered that our tickets we purchased did not come with seats. We paid to stand on the floor in front of the stage. And stand we did—for four hours straight. It was a good show; we really enjoyed it. But, it required some endurance—especially for this mid-50s guy.

We were eager to take our seats, had seats come with the tickets.

Jesus tells this parable about seats at a banquet going unfilled for reasons we can only speculate. But it seems as though he's emphasizing the importance of accepting the gift of welcome that comes with being invited, of being included at a special place of hospitality.

In addition to striving to make sure all are welcome, that all are included in the body of Christ, it's also important that all of us accept the invitation that's extended to us. If we're invited, this host really wants us to be there.

Author Christine Fohr writes about this parable, “Imagining those tables left empty makes the host angry. Angry that his generosity has been treated so flippantly, Angry that their absence could cause his own embarrassment. Angry that he now must save face and find substitutes to fill their now empty places around his banquet table.”

God’s love to us all never ceases. God’s extravagant love is never diminished. The invitation to it remains open. And yet, there’s no doubt that, like this banquet host in this story, God may get frustrated if not angry when those he invites into the kingdom of God fail to take their rightful place inside it.

What keeps us from saying “yes?” What keeps us from taking our place at the table that has been lovingly offered to us? Maybe there’s something inside us that keeps insisting there’s a better offer out there.

Maybe it’s the pursuit of worldly success, filled with the promise of financial independence. Maybe it’s the lure of leisure and relaxation that our culture is constantly offering up.

What keeps us from a table in the kingdom of God may also be the terrible experiences of a faith life that we’ve endured or had others tell us about in their own lives. Stories about how the church can’t be trusted, that it’s unsafe, that it’s filled with hypocrites or people with ulterior motives. It’s such a turnoff!

Or the belief that science and faith can’t exist together, that if we believe in the role of science and the advances that science has had in the world and that you work in the science world, then we couldn’t believe that God in Jesus Christ could be working alongside.

We say to God, quite regularly, that we have better things to do. We have better ways, we think, to spend our time. We have

more worthy causes to support, we think, than committing ourselves to this kingdom.

Or the pain of our past keeps us away. Severed relationships due to brokenness and death keep us from saying yes to the host. Or the shame of what we admit is our misbehavior keeps us from the table.

There's also a genuine sense of unworthiness that keeps us from accepting an invitation as grand as this. That we're not good enough or accomplished enough or faithful enough.

And what also keeps us from saying "yes" to God's invitation at times may also be the fact that we've said "yes" to other influences that seem to be better fits for what nourishes us—other ideologies or even substances that yearn to fill us in a lasting way.

A woman named Ashley Lande told her story in the recent edition of *Christianity Today*. She was 23 and high on LSD. And with it in her system, she felt like she was truly alive. And she became a rabid advocate for psychedelics, thinking that it was bridging the chasm between her and the source of life, whatever or whomever that was.

She said, "I met my husband at our drug dealer's house during a snowstorm, in a giddy fever of acid-saturated infatuation, and we were married in less than a year. We were certain we were on the cusp of a psychedelic revolution."

After she had given birth to their first child, however, she began to have doubts. The tripping out on LSD and other drugs wasn't the same. There became a "hum of dread underlying the whole experience—or, at worst, terror and disintegration." LSD was no longer a glimmering path to destinations beyond.

She reconnected with a childhood friend named Kerry, who had never abandoned her Christian faith in which she was raised. Kerry and her husband were young parents, too. And their kids had play dates together, where Kerry and Ashley would talk about matters of faith—Kerry steadfast in her faith in Jesus and a non-judgmental listener to Ashley’s experience with New Age theories.

Tragically, Kerry’s two-year-old daughter died from leukemia. And Ashley admired how Kerry and her husband, while heartbroken over their daughter’s death, were not completely destroyed by it. They grieved, but not as those without hope. This mystified Ashley.

This modeling of how to endure suffering, accompanied by the words of the apostle Paul and the great hymn “It Is Well with my Soul,” sent Ashley on a journey that woke her up to the reality that she was broken and that her forays into the psychedelic hinterlands couldn’t save her. But that Jesus could.

She concluded her piece by saying, “In the end, I finally found the thing that would make everything okay forever—in the last place I wanted to look.”

The last place we often want to look for true meaning and hope is the banquet table that Jesus hosts, where Jesus saves seats for us. And Ashley took hers.

Those offered an invitation to the banquet in the parable in Luke 14 came up with their reasons for not attending: new business ventures, a new marriage. Were they genuine reasons or excuses?

Whatever it was, they used their reasons for saying to the host, “I’ve got something better to do.”

We say the same things. We get occupied by other options with alluring promises.

The extravagant love of God, however, never quits. The banquet table is always open with a seat that has our name on it. And banquet's abundance endures.