

Stories to change the world: 3. Saying Yes

Luke 14:16-24

July 26, 2020

Pastor Steve Richards

It was one year ago that I stood here and introduced you to my grandson Basil. His birth was one of those defining moments that changed my priorities for the past year. Here we are 365 days later. [photo] Last Saturday was his first birthday. And what would a birthday be without a birthday cake? This photo is my favorite [photo] See the expression on his face. He just tasted sugar for the first time in his life – and he will never be the same. He won't remember his first birthday, but I will never forget it – and I and others who were there will help him remember as we tell the story of his first birthday cake and his first taste of sugar. And one day he won't know if he remembers that day or remembers hearing about that day. It is the power of story.

Last week, we looked at how Jesus used stories to help those around him see themselves, how they connected to the world, and then provided a vision of the world as it could be. The Gospel of Mark tells us: With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. (Mark 4:33) The gospel writers included 40 of his stories which he told over and over again so they would be remembered. They are not simple stories, but stories that are meant to push us toward a new way of living called the kingdom of God.

Before we look at today's story, it is important to know what Jesus was up to. As chapter 14 begins, Jesus is a dinner guest, maybe even the honored dinner guest at the home of a religious leader who has also invited other religious leaders. This is a tough crowd – and with all of the religious laws about what to eat and how to eat and with whom to eat, they were watching him – to see if he would slip up. As they are reclining at the table, Jesus starts teaching. He says: "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." (Luke 14:11) In Jesus' day, the well-off and well-educated saw themselves as superior in God's sight to the poor and uneducated – those at the margins of society. In other words, those who see themselves as better than other people will be brought low, and those who see themselves as lower than others will be lifted up. It's like the child who says his or her siblings, "I'm Dad's favorite" or "Mom loves me more" And what the child is actually saying: you don't deserve to be loved like I'm loved.

And then Jesus then turns to his host and offers some unsolicited advice for future dinner parties. "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can't repay you." (Luke 14:12-14) To be the people God wants us to be, we can't just invite those who will invite us in return, the people like us. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr said, "The most segregated hour of Christian America is 11:00 on Sunday morning." And nearly sixty years later, it still is. But not because that's the way God wants it. We tend to associate with people like us. People who look like us, live like us. But Jesus is pushing the dinner guests to imagine a different way. Look to the margins. Look for those not like you. Look for those who have not been invited, and when they are invited to the table, that's when we experience the kingdom of God. Hearing this news, one of the dinner guests exclaims: Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom. (Luke 14:15)

And that's when Jesus tells this story. A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for dinner, the host sent a servant to tell the invited guests – it's time.

But they all had excuses. One had purchased a farm and had to see it. One had purchased five teams of oxen and needed to check on them. And one had just gotten married and could not come. It is a simple story, but it's not about a guy who sends an invite and nobody responds. This story is an allegory. There's a deeper meaning. The host is actually God who invites everybody in town to this banquet, and this banquet is actually the kingdom of God. This is a story about salvation and God's invitation of grace.

If you were the host, and no one showed up for your party, how would you feel? This is a big, important party and you invited everyone you know, but as you wait by the door, nobody comes. How would you feel? Embarrassed, humiliated, hurt? Jesus says the host was angry, and he refused to give up on the dinner party. And here's where the story takes an unexpected turn. The host says to his servant, Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame. (Luke 14:21) That's what the servant does. He invites all the people who never got an invite, who never get invited to parties, and everybody came because they were so happy to be invited. But then the servant sees there is still room for more, and the host says Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. (Luke 14:23) Move the boundaries. Step outside your comfort zone. Go to the least, the lost, and the left out – the people no one wants around them. God won't stop inviting until everyone is invited, everyone is able to experience the kingdom of God.

I think of the tents that have appeared in the city parks of Minneapolis, people who have nowhere else to go. Our daughter lives a few blocks from Powderhorn Park, and when the tents first appeared, she walked into the tent city to listen to the people who are there, to bring them water and food. And she said, "Dad, no one is helping them." Since no one else was responding, the neighborhood around the park has been providing food, and portapotties and garbage collection. There are people who are waiting for servants to arrive.

If God is the host, who is the servant? It's Jesus. He is hope for the hopeless. He opens the Master's home for those who need grace and mercy and a place to call home. He welcomes those who have lost any sense of being loveable. Come and follow me. Come and experience the party. Come and enter the kingdom of God. Everyone's invited, but we cannot take this invitation of grace for granted. It's an invitation that needs a response – a yes. Jesus wants those of us who know him to get up and invite the unexpected guests into the kingdom of God. He calls us to do the very things he was doing. We know the boundaries of our comfort zones. And if we are ready to invite anyone, it's the people we know who live with our comfort zone. And Jesus is saying – that comfort zone that you have – push beyond it.

Many years ago, I attended a conference in which Tony Campolo was speaking and he told a story that I've not forgotten. He also includes this story in his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. Tony said he was invited to speak at an event in Honolulu. He's from Pennsylvania and with the difference in time zones, he could not sleep. So at 3:00 a.m. he's wide awake, and he's hungry so he leaves the hotel and begins walking through the streets of Honolulu. He finds this small diner that is open. So he enters. It is so small there are no booths, just a counter. He sits at the counter, orders a coffee and a donut, and just as he takes a bite from the donut, a group of 8 or 9 prostitutes enter the diner. He can tell – their clothing is provocative – and they fill the seats on either side of him. One of them named Agnes who is seated on his right calls out to another woman seated on his left: "Hey, tomorrow is my 39th birthday." And her friend replied, "So what. Don't expect anything from me. No one ever did anything for my birthday." And Agnes replied, "Why do you have to put me down. I'm not asking you to do anything. Nobody's ever done anything for my birthday. I'm just saying it's my birthday." And the conversation continues as they shout at each other. Tony is feeling outside his comfort zone and thought he should get

up and leave, but he doesn't. He sits there quietly drinking his coffee and eating his donut until they leave.

Tony asks the guy working the diner, "Do they come here every night?" And he says, "every night at 3:30 just like clockwork." "Did you hear tomorrow is Agnes' 39th birthday? What would you think if we threw her a party?" And the guy says, "That's a wonderful idea. Let's do it." And he insists on making the cake. So the next morning at 2:30, Tony shows up at the diner with streamers that he places around the room and a sign that says Happy Birthday, Agnes. Someone must have tipped off the other prostitutes in Honolulu because the diner was packed. Can you picture it? A diner filled with prostitutes – and Tony. Streamers, a poster taped to the mirror behind the counter that said Happy Birthday, Agnes – and a birthday cake.

And right at 3:30 in comes the same group of 8-9 prostitutes, and all together, everyone shouts, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Suddenly, her jaw drops, and she starts crying. She is overwhelmed, and her knees buckle. And as her friends help her to the counter, the cook brings her the birthday cake. And they all sing happy birthday. He hands her a knife to cut the cake, but with tears streaming down her face, she asks, "Is it okay if we don't eat this cake? I don't want to eat it." And he says, "Sure. Whatever you want. It's your cake." She says, "I live two doors down, and I want to take it home. My mom is there, and I want her to see the cake." So Agnes picks up the cake, walks out of the diner, and everyone else is standing there in silence. Tony said, "I didn't know what else to do so I said, 'let's pray.'" And he prayed for Agnes and her life and that God would deliver her and make her new. And when Tony said, "Amen." The guy who ran the diner said, "You didn't tell me you were a pastor and part of a church. What kind of church do you work for?" And Tony replied, "I'm part of a church that likes to throw parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning in Honolulu!" "No you're not! There's no church out there that does that because if there was a church like that, I would join it."

Wouldn't we all? That's the kind of church Jesus came to create. A church that is ready to take risks, to do the unexpected, to push the boundaries, to have the audacity to say "Everyone is Welcome here" and then go and meet people where they are and invite them to experience the unmerited, unlimited grace and mercy of God. And we don't need a building to do that.

Wherever there are hurting people, God is waiting for us to say YES, we see – Yes, we will go where people have been pushed aside. Because that's what makes life better – and what makes us better at life. Wednesday night, we are throwing a party in our parking lot – and we are asking you to come and invite others to come. It's at 6:30. You can find information on our website. Next Friday, we are providing a food distribution in south Minneapolis – giving away bags of groceries to people who do not have enough food for their families. You could help with that or provide food for that. God has prepared a banquet, and we are the servants who are sent out into the streets to invite others to come. I don't want and I don't want you to miss out on the kingdom of God. Say yes – and invite someone to the party.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 26, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Welcome God, you invite us all to feast with you. Thank you for your great faithfulness every day of our lives, and for calling us each day into your presence that we may learn about your kingdom. Teach us about gratitude and hospitality and show us how to be your faithful disciples. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Monday, July 27

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain, the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavor, of choice wines well refined. He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, the shroud enshrouding all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The LORD God will wipe tears from every face; he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth, for the LORD has spoken. They will say on that day, "Look! This is our God, for whom we have waited—and he has saved us! This is the LORD, for whom we have waited; let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

Observation: As Israel's story began, God promised Abraham, "All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you" (Genesis 12:3). The prophet Isaiah said when God was victorious, he would prepare "a rich feast"—that was how rulers marked victories. The great food and drink was just a symbolic appetizer. God promised to "swallow up death forever," and "wipe tears from every face." And God's banquet would be for "all peoples," "all nations," "the whole earth."

Application: By the time of Jesus, Israel's religious leaders loved the image of God's great banquet. Many were sure they would be the honored guests. But they missed a crucial part of the vision. In one of the visions in Isaiah, God was imagined preparing a banquet not just for the elders on Mount Sinai, nor even for Judah, but for all the nations. What tempts you to limit your vision of God's "banquet" to just your own church, nation or ethnic group? How does your heart respond to God's vision?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the day your victory over death and evil becomes complete will be the ultimate day of celebration. Keep reminding me that, through your death and resurrection, you already assured that victory. Amen.

Tuesday, July 28

Scripture: Matthew 21:45-22:6

Now when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard the parable, they knew Jesus was talking about them. They were trying to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.

Jesus responded by speaking again in parables: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn't want to come. Again he sent other servants and said to them, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Look, the meal is all prepared. I've butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything's ready. Come to the wedding party!'" But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them.

Observation: Just before this passage, on the Monday before his crucifixion, Jesus told a story about tenant farmers who killed the vineyard owner's son (Matthew 21:33-44). In today's reading, Jesus switched the image to a wedding party, but the underlying message was the same. Here invited guests were not just refusing to attend a feast but abusing and killing the servants sent to tell them the party was ready to start.

Application: The chief priests and the Pharisees had made up their minds about Jesus. But Matthew said, “They feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.” They reached a conclusion we Christians do not share, but they were also acting on that conclusion in a way shaped not by principle, but by a desire to maintain a public image at odds with the facts. Is there any area of life where you “fear the crowds” too much to act authentically?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I would never grab your servants, abuse and kill them. Would I? Free me from the urge to wound even people I disagree with through words or actions that fall short of your honesty and compassion. Amen.

Wednesday, July 29

Scripture: Matthew 22:7-14

“The king was angry. He sent his soldiers to destroy those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding party is prepared, but those who were invited weren’t worthy. Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of town and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.’ “Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests. Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn’t wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ But he was speechless. Then the king said to his servants, ‘Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.’ “Many people are invited, but few people are chosen.”

Observation: The king in this story seems harsh to us. In this story, though, the king was a “puppet.” He acted as the hearers expected a king to act. Jesus’ lesson was not about God, but about the invited guests, snubbing the feast or showing disrespect to the host. Some scholars suggest that the host would have provided special garments; others simply note that coming to a wedding banquet in dirty clothing would insult the host. The parable asked the hearers (who were plotting to kill Jesus): how are you responding to God’s invitation?

Application: Jesus wasn’t teaching that we should wear tuxes to weddings. The wedding clothes represent a fruitful life lived in obedience to God’s will. (Revelation 19:7-8) The metaphor is made possible by the significance of clothing in the ancient world, in which one’s clothing exhibited one’s character. As you respond to God’s invitation to be part of the great kingdom feast, how “well-dressed” are you? Are there any areas of life where you feel like showing up in the spiritual equivalent of ragged shorts and flip flops?

Prayer: Lord God, I want to honor your gift of forgiveness and salvation by “dressing” myself with the Lord Jesus Christ. Guide me in building a life that exhibits my gratitude and respect for you. Amen.

Thursday, July 30

Scripture: Luke 14:7-14

When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable. “When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don’t take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host. The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give your seat to this other person.’ Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place. Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, ‘Friend, move up here to a better seat.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your

fellow guests. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.” Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, “When you host a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can’t repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected.”

Observation: Jesus wasn’t urging sneaky manipulation in this passage, a false “Aw shucks” modesty. He was calling us to set aside our obsession with rank and status and be at peace with who we are. Consistent with his entire life and teaching, he urged people to avoid selfishly pushing for their own recognition and advantage, to leave room for honoring others.

Application: Have you ever known (or maybe even been) a person like the ones Jesus noticed who “sought out the best seats at the table”? In what ways can that attitude show itself in school, games, the workplace, even church work? What’s the difference between healthy assertiveness, so that you can use your gifts to bless others, and the kind of self-promotion Jesus warned against? In the light of history, do you believe Jesus was well-meaning but naïve—or was he right? In what ways can you welcome into God’s family people to whom you might feel superior?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have honored me by loving, redeeming and accepting me. Help me keep growing in my ability to extend that same kind of generosity to others. Amen.

Friday, July 31

Scripture: Luke 14:15-20

When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus’ remarks, he said to Jesus, “Happy are those who will feast in God’s kingdom.” Jesus replied, “A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, ‘Come! The dinner is now ready.’ One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, ‘I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I bought five teams of oxen, and I’m going to check on them. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

Observation: Jesus’ hearers would readily see these excuses as flimsy when they heard them. One normally would inspect a field before buying it. One normally tested oxen before buying them. Weddings were planned far in advance, so the new husband knew about the conflict before he agreed to come. Each of the excuses in verses 18-20 is so weak that it would insult the host; together, it is clear that the excuses constitute deliberate dishonor.

Application: Jesus is dealing here with something psychologists did not begin to address until nineteen hundred years later – that life breaks down as a result of our defense mechanisms. You might say that you had a good excuse for not having a more regular quiet time for Bible reading and prayer. And perhaps you might pray, “Lord, I’m so busy. Help me simplify my schedule so I can put You first.” But what if God replied, “You haven’t missed a meal in years!” In what areas are you giving God excuses? How will you lower your internal defenses so that you can be more honest with God and with yourself?

Prayer: God, when I fall short of your ideal (and I do), help me not to hide behind flimsy excuses. Teach me to trust your love enough to honestly face the things that come between me and the life you offer me. Amen.

Saturday, August 1

Scripture: Luke 14:21-24

When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Observation: Jesus lived among many religious people who recoiled at the idea of sharing God's kingdom with "sinners" (a term they defined roughly as "not as good as I am"). He told some of them this story. The ending was shocking: against all established social protocol, the king invited even the town's street people to come enjoy the royal banquet.

Application: This parable isn't about "those poor people" who aren't like us. We all come to God's banquet as people who are spiritually poor, crippled, blind and lame – people who need God's grace. So the story poses two very personal questions. First, can you see the degree to which you are a person standing before God, who desperately and gratefully needs God's grace and mercy? Second, are you open to inviting and welcoming into God's kingdom other persons of all kinds who live around you, even if at first you might feel a bit uncomfortable in their company? What has helped you learn to bless others with humble gratitude, not as a superior lowering yourself to help an inferior?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you loved ragamuffin me enough to die for me, enough to promise to be with me every day. I ask you to guide me in the process of laying aside my pride, to serve you and others every day in love and gratitude. Amen.