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THE SCRIPTURE
Luke 14:15-23

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So, the servant returned and reported this. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.’”

THE MESSAGE
“You Need to Get Out More: Set a Table”
Mark Briley

Do you have a tier system for restaurants you like to frequent? Maybe you’ve got a fast-food tier that ranks French fries or is your favorite quick bite even though you feel bad about it afterward. You’ve got your mid-tier joints – probably not a server required but certainly a notch above the vanishing-forever-McRib sandwich. Maybe you’ve got a few other tiers in there – like the special occasion tier – that comes with multiple forks that must be used at the specific and appropriate times.

Carrie and I were at a special occasion restaurant with some friends one time and became fascinated by our fellow diners. The restaurant came highly recommend by another pair of friends, and so we went for it. It was one of those places that had a beautiful view of the city we were visiting, and the room was filled with characters which made for interesting conversation at our own table. Why had these other guests come to *this* place on *this* night?

There was a party of women around our age, who were clearly enjoying the chance to catch up with one another; a reunion of old college friends perhaps. There was a couple with their adult son – sort of dressed up but no conversation flowing at their table. Was it joy or punishment – hard to tell. A giddy couple sat in the corner spot, dressed in, could it be, surely not... a wedding gown and tux? Sure enough. They had just gotten married. At the table just up from ours was a middle-aged woman who dined alone. She was ordering every course – not seemingly lonely but also not overly enthused either. Was she on a business trip enjoying a meal on the company card? Was it the date of a significant moment previously shared with someone else who was no longer around? Whatever the case, here we all were – living our non-intersecting lives in the same room, tables set for each of us, sharing nothing but the laughter of the college reunion table and the loaf of banana bread each guest received as a unique, if not strange, parting gift.

I thought of those people this week, thinking about table settings, dinners with Jesus, and the need to get out more. I wondered especially about the woman eating alone. I've been a solo diner from time to time and I'm fine with it once in a while. I'm an introvert, remember? Some of you are still on me, shocked about my recent claim of introversion. It's true. But solo dining? I wonder.

A dear and faithful friend of ours from Tulsa recently posted on social media, "*I'm eating out by myself for the first time.*" Sixty years of marriage to her beloved and he finally had to move into a memory care unit. She was out running errands sometime after and was hungry and was near one of their favorite places. It clearly caught her in a moment, however, one of the many "*firsts*" she's running into these days.

Eating solo became a big thing during the pandemic – so much so that it grew an industry all by itself. Morgan Ome, writer for *The Atlantic*, shared her experience in an article entitled, "*How I Learned to Eat Alone and Not Be Lonely: What two years of solo dinners taught me.*"¹ As her world shrunk in the Spring of 2020 to the square footage of her apartment, food became a mode of injecting delight into an otherwise bleak and lonely period of life – when no one was getting out much at all. This moved from pizza

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/06/secret-to-eating-alone-eat-with-me-tiktok/661249/>

delivery to sampling different brands of instant ramen to low-effort dishes like scrambled eggs and ultimately... a dish of despair. She began to wonder if she'd ever dine with friends and family again. Her mental health declined, daily tasks became more difficult to complete, and mealtime was just another lonely chore. She was a bit surprised one night, eating alone, watching TikTok videos on her phone to discover something TikTok suggested on her "*For You*" page. It was videos of other people eating alone.

Others were struggling in similar ways, so they started filming their ordinary, solitary dining experiences and sharing them as companions to others eating solo. Some were encouraging those struggling with eating disorders or simply creating conversation, leaving silent spaces for others to respond as they asked questions of a stranger hopefully watching and eating on the other side of the screen. Pretty soon, the hashtag, *#eatwithme* had more than 3.4 billion views. At the click of a button, you could take a foodie tour with someone at Disney World or eat with someone trying cauliflower nachos for the first time. *#eatwithme* – a gamechanger.

What this continues to affirm is that we are a people who rally around food – in healthy ways and in less than healthy ways. Whether we are dining by ourselves or at banquet tables with hundreds, we know something happens around meals. This has long been true and will surely always be the case. The first meal recorded in Scripture – a piece of fruit from the forbidden tree – was a meal eaten alone (*Genesis 3*). The last meal recorded in Scripture – the feast of the heavenly kingdom – is a generous banquet shared in community (*Revelation 7*). Everywhere in between – especially as we look at Luke's account of Jesus' life today – Jesus winds up at dinner tables and always makes the most of it. For Jesus, the table is more than the thing that holds the food but the hub of hospitality where guards come down, truth gets told, and relationships grow and ultimately change the world. It's why some have called the Jesus movement a culinary revolution. He ate with strangers, friends, and most notably those simply labeled sinners but by the end of the meal – they were friends.

We're in the home stretch of our current series called, "*You Need to Get Out More*."² We've talked about how the issues of isolating at home so much in recent years have contributed to the chronic isolation of our society, which has led to a spiritual homelessness of sorts. Many have disconnected, and it becomes challenging to reconnect. We're taking the old wisdom word, "*You Need to Get Out More*" to stretch ourselves in this new world, to get unstuck from any closed-off patterns and open ourselves to God and one another in ways that will grow us forward as a church and as people of faith. |

² Inspired by the book with the same title by Mark Feldmeir. 2012.

loved hearing from one of our Broadway friends last week who said, *“I took the challenge and invited all of my neighbors over for a dinner party – some old neighbors and some that have never met each other.”* Some were a bit timid and skeptical at first, but she said that it exceeded any of their expectations, and now they’re all on that next-level-neighbor-tier status. How awesome is that?! So... today’s advice in a similar spirit? Set a table.

There’s a lot of table settin’ happening in Luke 14. Just ahead of the *Parable of the Great Banquet*, which is our theme text today, Jesus has been invited to a dinner party himself by the religious insiders known as the Pharisees. They have heard a lot about Jesus and frankly, are worried about him meddling with their religion. They know he’s hanging with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other concerning characters, and yet he’s intrigued enough people, he’s done some healing, that they want to see for themselves what kind of threat he really is. So, they all show at the party and the jockeying for position at the table commences – a huge deal in first-century business.

And even today, the seat of honor means something, and people covet the good seats for most any occasion. Jesus steps back and just watches as they fight like a game of musical chairs to sit close to the host – who hasn’t yet entered the room. Jesus speaks up, *“Suggestion!”* he says. *“You’re going about this all wrong. The right play is to sit at the lowest position at the table so that when the host comes in and sees you sitting there, the host will make a big deal in front of everyone saying, ‘Why are you sitting down there... get over here, you, and sit up here with me.’”* The subtle notion is that the host invites you to a position of honor – you can’t fight your way up to it yourself. Maybe a grace versus works conversation to be had here. *“Nonsense,”* says Pharisee number four in the room. *“Who invited this loser?”* he continues to fight for position as he scoffs at Jesus. Some just have to throw their elbows around, right?

Didn’t ruffle Jesus at all. Jesus says, *“Nonsense? Maybe. But your motives are all wrong here. You just want the status. You want the ego-strokes. You’re only in this for the Instagram pic. You’ve only got time for others when it’s going to bump you up a seat or two at the table.”* And then he says, *“Check this out.”* Jesus goes into the parable you heard about the Great Banquet. A guy was throwing a party and getting ghosted by all his first-tier invitees. We don’t know whether their excuses were real or fabricated because they didn’t want to come. Were they texting each other, *“Hey ... you going to that party? I’m not going if you’re not.”* Or maybe that’s the only margin of time they have to build some of their own life – test driving that car (*or oxen as it were*), scouting out some new property, or heaven forbid the one who turned down the invite because they just got married.

I heard this past week that society’s sense of time in the margin – meaning your free time – has really tightened up. Maybe it’s not that we have less time than we did before

the pandemic, but we're just looking at it differently. You had a little taste of a different pace, and now you're protecting that time more than before. I've heard this about church, too – "*Sunday's our only day that's not overly scheduled.*"

Believe me I get it. And you must say "No" to some things, even good things, if you're going to maintain your health. I was told long ago, especially in ministry, that you're always going to disappoint someone – don't always make it your family. We had a rare night a couple of weeks ago where all five of us were home, and not a one of us had something on the schedule that had to be tended to. We made dinner together, sat together, and laughed, and then all five of us went out and jumped on the trampoline – *family jump* as we used to call it – something we hadn't done for a long time.

So why is the host Jesus is talking about so harsh on these first invitees who RSVP'd with their regrets? Sounds like a bit of a spoiled host who's throwing a tantrum that his first-choice guests wouldn't be coming. You know that feeling of being turned down, I'm sure. And so, as the story goes on – the party planning team is sent out to find some other randoms, who might want to come to the party. They get a good and growing response, but there's still room. The Master says, "*We've got room for more – don't leave a single space empty.*" And so, the invites just keep going out and, it seems, the timing was right for a banquet room full of folks.

The point? Maybe the point is that some just aren't ready. They're building their own kingdoms but missing out on something they don't even know they need in their life. They've got priorities on other things right now. Don't judge them – just invite again and their spirit may open another time. If you're one who is constantly turning down invites – take care of yourself, utilize needed boundaries – but also keep a listening ear. What are you turning down that may need a little more work on your spirit? What opportunity? What friendship? What call to serve? Maybe you need the boundary still... or maybe the invite is the nudge of God saying – "*There's something in this that you've been waiting for your whole life.*" "No" is important and a complete sentence. But use your "Yes" sometimes too – it may change your life.

The extended invites and acceptances remind us that many are hungry... for food, yes, but also for connection, for meaning, for purpose and are just waiting to be invited. Do you have an invitational spirit? Especially when it comes to your faith these days? Are you putting that spirit out there saying, "*Come with me to worship. Come join me in this study. Come serve with me. Let's get out in the community and do something meaningful together.*" Some are just waiting to be asked. If there's any consistent reality in this parable – it's that the invitation needs to keep going out.

There's an organization called *The Great Banquet* – it's a retreat experience organized around this very passage of Scripture. Our church in Indianapolis was active in this

ministry sending hundreds by now – men and women attending these spiritual retreats. It's one of those things that is not fully revealed to potential attendees – the mystery is part of the experience that invites the spiritual awe and wonder of what happens while you're there. I was a full-time seminarian and full-time minister, and Carrie and I were soon welcoming a daughter to our family. In this stretch of time, I was invited to attend for a couple of years by that point – never pressured and in fact, such was part of the invitation – if it's not the time for the one you invite, it's not the time. You simply invite and for the one whose timing is right, they'll know. What is ours to do? Be intentional about our inviting. God will lean into the hearts of those ready in this season. It's why Galatians 6:9 has long been a favorite: "*Don't grow weary doing what's right for the harvest will come in due season if we don't give up.*" And I always ask, "*When is due season?*" And I always hear in response, "*When the season is due.*" Ahh! The point? Don't grow weary... keep inviting... get out more... the harvest will come in due season if we don't give up.

Jonathan Martin was a pastor, who had lost it. What had he lost? His marriage. His passion for the faith. All came crashing down one Easter. He baptized many, preached resurrection, and resigned at the end of the Easter service. Not the best timing for that sort of thing. He just couldn't do it anymore. It started a season of solo dining, soul-searching, and a rebuilding of life in faith. Nothing about it was easy. His identity was gone. His heart was broken. And he had a lot of questions. In this season of searching, he listened more than he spoke. He got out and met people. He ran into an old friend at a festival, who introduced him to friend of his named James.

They were floored as they discovered some unexpected connections – James had heard one of Jonathan's sermons about learning to see and love people from the underside of things. It had been forwarded around from friend to friend. It was transformative to James, who tried to email Jonathan to tell him so, but the email never reached him. James had worked for the televangelist, Pat Robertson's 700 Club, for most of his career, trying to walk the straight and narrow as he understood it, while struggling with his own identity. He told the painful story of coming out as a gay man, ultimately chronicling his story in a book of his own. After learning of some other friends, they shared in common and discovering they lived in the same area, Jonathan and James became friends themselves.

A few months later, it was Thanksgiving and would be Jonathan's first since his marriage to his wife had ended. He had plans to go to his folks' home for the holiday that Friday, but Thanksgiving Day would be spent alone for the first time in his life; a kind of *quiet* in his life that was new. He had been learning how to be quiet in a healthy way and adjust to fewer emails in the inbox and less voicemails on his cell phone. But dining alone on Thanksgiving admittedly brought on some feels. James called and

invited him to Thanksgiving lunch, and Jonathan surprised himself by how thrilled he was to be invited. Here's how he describes the experience...

“So, I come over to the beautiful house James shares with his friend Greg. Strangely symbolic of my life at the time, I didn't have a dish to bring; I was just there to be fed from their table. I sat around the table with James; Greg; Greg's boyfriend, Kai; their three doting mothers; and a young couple – a man and woman from the UK who are James' friends. The young man is apparently 244th from the throne in England – who knew? So, there you have it – three gay guys; a former Pentecostal pastor trying to get his life together; three sweet, sixty-something Southern moms; and some vague British royalty.

I was no longer sitting at the head of Christ's table with the people who decide who is or is not worthy to receive from it. I was the one in need of being loved and accepted. I was given a place at a table that was not my own. I was the wounded one being offered bread and wine I did not deserve. There was no hope or expectation that my new friends would see Jesus in me – only an opportunity to see Jesus animated in the faces of my friends, these icons of grace.

James asked Jonathan to pray over the meal – “*since we **do** have a pastor with us today,*” he said. “*Former pastor,*” Jonathan laughed. But it was a lump in the throat kind of moment for him. If he could be pastor enough for the ceremonial Thanksgiving prayer, he would be so honored. “*When we bowed our heads, it took me a full minute to compose myself enough to pray. After, as we filled our plates with casseroles, the table was filling up with stories. We talked about our brokenness, and we talked about our joy. There had never been a place, a moment, or a meal I had been more thankful for than that place, that moment, that meal. The Thanksgiving I had most dreaded was the most beautiful one I had ever had. I felt the same tremble in my lips I get when I take the chalice each Sunday while kneeling to receive communion.*”³

Something happens around meals, you know? What was the Jesus movement called? A culinary revolution? Sometimes we need to set a table for someone else. And sometimes, we need to humbly dine at a table set for us.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH

³ How to Survive a Shipwreck: Help Is on the Way and Love is Already Here. by Jonathan Martin. Pg. 189-190. 2016. Zondervan.