

How To Give a Banquet

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church (Ministry Sunday)

Recently I was attending a funeral for a teenager who had died. The church held about 250 people. More than 450 people attended the funeral. Or tried. Suspecting something like this to be the case, I arrived early, and because I was not particularly close with either the deceased or the family, I slid into an empty pew towards the back. As the church filled up, I was joined by another priest, and then couples on either side of us. The pew was full. Then another couple squeezed into the pew. Eventually, the other priest and I gave our seats up to yet another elderly couple and joined the increasing crowds standing at the back of the church. Soon I found myself pressed back into the woodwork adorning the back of the church, like some statue in a cathedral niche.

And just as I was feeling like I'd become a piece church decor, these four high school boys came into the church, surveyed the situation, marched up the center aisle, and sat down in the empty second pew.

Less than a minute later, the head usher filled my heart with glee (not necessarily the holy part of my heart). He walked down the aisle and spoke to the young men. They stood up; exited that second pew (which was empty, of course, because it was reserved for family and friends). And they did their best to sneak back up the side aisle without making eye contact with anyone, and took their places standing at the back. It was awesome.

My priest friend remarked, "You know, I think there's a parable about this."

And here it is! In the parable, it's a wedding banquet — but it's true for funerals as well. Follow along with me, beginning at verse 8: "When you are going to a funeral, do not sit down in the front pews, lest those seats be reserved and the head usher will come and say to you, 'Give your place to the friends and family,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place."

Friends, these parables... we should listen to them. This Jesus fellow knew what he was talking about.

And that remark — "You know, I think there's a parable about this" — is exactly the way we're supposed to let parables (and really all of scripture) intersect our daily lives. When we can see what's happening in our lives and say, "You know, that's like

the time in scripture when..." then we're really starting to get it. To see our lives in terms of the scriptures is to begin to see our lives as God sees them.

Today, at St. Andrew's, you can see what's happening. It's our Ministry Sunday. And I want to help you see Ministry Sunday in terms of Jesus' advice on throwing a party. So not the part of this passage about where to sit, but the part that begins in verse 12 about what to do when you give a banquet.

Ministry Sunday has, in years past, been called Ministry Fair. Personally, I've always wanted to call it The Annual Melting of Ministry Leaders, but focus groups deemed that uncomfortably accurate. This year though we dropped the 'Fair' — mostly because throwing a "fair" makes it seem like the fair itself is the thing to which we're inviting everyone.

But that's not what all this is about. Ministry Sunday is not about coming to a party, but about signing up to help throw the party. That's why Jesus' advice for the banquet givers is worth looking at.

Let's start in verse 12. It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus approaches the giving of luncheons and dinners as a resource question? Don't invite friends, or brothers, or relatives, or rich neighbors — because they have the resources to invite you back. That's not giving a dinner party, Jesus says, that's exchanging dinner parties.

Now, there are certain opportunities at St. Andrew's to literally live this parable out. Take the BlessMobile. The way the BlessMobile works is this. Once a month volunteers from our church make Sunday lunch/dinner. And then a crew takes it over to the Merrit housing complex and we invite the people there — most of whom are poor, and some of whom are varying degrees of crippled and lame. To my knowledge, none of them are completely blind — but not everyone can see real good. And the goal, which we get closer to each week, is not just to feed people, but to share a feast together — to eat and pray and play. We're not just feeding bellies; we're beginning to feed friends.

Even on the most narrow and literal reading of this passage possible, the BlessMobile is us trying to do exactly what Jesus said. And we have a big plans for the year ahead, plans that will only be realized because the people in this room will hear these words of Jesus and they will see the opportunities we have to grow this BlessMobile ministry and they'll say, "You know, I think Jesus said something about this."

But not everything we do matches Jesus' words quite so exactly. A lot of our ministries, from lay reading to singing in the choir, don't involve a literal banquet. Nor or those we serve always literally poor, crippled, lame and blind. But here I think Jesus is still telling us something. He's saying, whatever you have the

resources to do, do it for the sake of those who need it most, not for the sake of reciprocation or reward.

So what does this say about the other great new missional endeavor St. Andrew's is embarking upon this fall, the opening of our Westridge campus at Mooneyham Elementary School in a little less a month? Well, think about it like we're throwing a banquet. If you're one of those really concrete people, remember, we serve food and drinks. And we are inviting to it those who are impoverished by the daily grind of materialism, those whose lives are crippled by not having a church home, those who have been made lame by 'religious' people in the past, and those who are blind to the love and glory of God in the world.

Now you may be thinking, "Gosh, it seems a little extreme to go around calling our fellow suburbanites who not in our church yet poor, crippled, lame and blind." Exactly! The whole point of Jesus' message here is to stop thinking about others in terms of what's wrong with them, but in terms of what's right with them. And what's right with them is that they are invited. When we think about our mission field, we can't think about others in terms of what they don't have, but in terms of what they do have, which is the image of God implanted on their very beings and a Savior who will love them no matter how far they've strayed. And we're going to go over there because that's important and we are out of seats.

The core team for this Westridge campus has done an amazing amount of work this summer getting us ready to throw this feast. It's been such a blessing to work with them (really to continue to work with them—we have a busy four weeks coming up). I can't thank them enough, either personally, or as a leader in the church. But we on the core team at the point now where it's time to say, "Help!"

The Core Team has figured out how to do it, but God's is calling St. Andrew's, all of us, to give the banquet. This isn't my campus, or the Core Team's campus. It's St. Andrew's second campus, and I'm confident that we have the resources in this congregation to make it flourish. I can't wait. I hope you can see that, and say, "You know, I think Jesus said something about this."

And so I ask, what do you have the resources — not simply material resources, but the talents and skills and interests that God has given you — what do you have the resources to do?

I hope you know that no matter what your paycheck says, or what your bank balance is, or what your credit card bill looks like, you can be rich in terms of God's gifts. But by the same token, it's totally possible to have a seven-figure inheritance when it comes to talents, but to only be giving the occasional dollar or two back to God.

Now look at verse 14. If you have a pen, get it out — because we're going to do some underlining. What will happen when you do this? You will be blessed. Not *may* be blessed; you will be blessed. It will happen.

The sentence goes on: “because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” There is clearly a future tense element here, a pointing towards heaven. That’s when we get repaid. I often joke with Nancy Brockman, who heads up all the ministries related to food at the church (if you eat something in our around this building, chances are Nancy is at least indirectly responsible), that the room Jesus is preparing for her in heaven is going to have sweet room service.

So Jesus identifies the resurrection of the just as the time of repayment, but the blessing is broader. The blessing that he promised straddles the line between this life and the next. You will be blessed — but not just in heaven, you will be blessed here as well.

See, when God blessed you with talents, he wasn’t just blessing you. God blesses his people to bless the world. When God was gifting you, he was gifting the world.

It’s like this: a month or so ago, after worship was over, I was at the back of the church greeting people when one of the sweet saints of our congregation came to me and pressed a \$10 bill into my hand. She said, “This is to go take your sweet children to get ice cream.” So she gifted me \$10, but in so doing she was really gifting my family, just making me steward of the resources involved.

This, in microcosm, is exactly what God has done with you. God has gifted you with resources — time, talents, interests, desires, loves — but in so doing, he has really gifted the world, just making you steward of the resources involved. To get back to the language of our parable, you have the resources to throw lunches and dinners (literal and metaphorical) for God’s people.

And friends, there’s an amazing and wonderful blessing to be had when you identify those resources — when you identify the gifts and talents that God has given you — and then use them in the service of God’s kingdom. It’s like being the puzzle piece that you rotate and suddenly fits; like being a lightbulb screwed into a socket at that moment when it suddenly pops on (and you remember that you forgot to turn off the switch).

Now you may have tried some ministries before and not had this feeling. Or maybe you felt that way once, but have lost that feeling.

If either of these are true of you, either you haven’t felt it or you lost it, you might be like my lawnmower. My lawnmower runs. I fill it with gas; I pull the cable; it comes to life. And the blade spins, and the grass is shorter coming out the back

than it is going in the front. So it gets the job done. But my lawnmower is not leading a blessed life. It sputters and revs and chokes; it sounds like some asthmatic metal monster trapped in a tin can. My lawnmower survives it's weekly (or maybe biweekly) ministry assignment. But it hates it. [I know, some of you feel like my lawnmower.]

The problem is that my lawnmower needs a change (namely of the oil, air filter, and spark plugs). If you feel about whatever ministry you are in the way my lawnmower feels about mowing my lawn, I want you to know, something is not quite right. You need to make a change. Sure, the ministries to which Jesus calls us can be hard, and require sacrifice, and sometimes even be unpleasant. But remember verse 14, it doesn't say you'll survive, it says "You will be blessed."

When you do what Jesus suggests, when you find the right way to share what you have with those who don't — be it your food with a child or clarinet skills with the congregation — it's an amazing feeling.

If you don't know that feeling, may I direct your attention to these boxes, please? And if you need some help with figuring out which ones are for you, I invite you to come our Wednesday night series beginning in ten days or so. It's all about taking inventory of your gifts and resources, and then matching those to needs and opportunities for the service of God's kingdom.

You can do that. You can identify and claim God's gifts of time, talent, interest, and resources. And then you can identify where those can be used to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when you do that, you'll begin to see God working through you.

You know, Jesus said something about this. He looked out upon those who had gathered to feast with him, as we have today, and he said, "When you throw a feast, make it so the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind are identified not by their deficiencies, but by their invitation to the table." And he's blessed each one of us individually so that together, we have the resources to live that out. Let's party!