

**No Time Like the Present  
Luke 14: 16-24  
Don Lincoln**

I was with my brother-in-law over Labor Day weekend, and he asked me how things were going at the church, and I told him that the coming Sunday was kickoff Sunday. He got a big grin on his face – and said to me, “Hey – that’s really cool. So, when the NFL has its opening game, and all us fantasy footballers are picking teams, you tie that in to your church? Man – I love it!!”

I just smiled at him. Not because I didn’t have the heart to tell him that wasn’t exactly WHY we called it kickoff Sunday – but because I’d never actually thought about that connection to the NFL. Then I wondered – most churches call it Rally Day. Maybe somebody at Westminster – before I came – had called it kickoff Sunday because it DOES coincide with the opening of football season!!! What do I know?

I did some googling. That’s what I do when I’m not sure about things! I googled Rally day and the first thing that came up was something about a church. Then I googled “Kickoff Sunday” and got 29 million results in .75 seconds – but had to go pages and pages deep to find anything churchy – finally it was the Hollowell Church in Waynesboro, PA. I clicked on it, and their website had a picture of two guys smiling and giving each other high-fives in football jerseys.

Hey – maybe that could work. We could put a notice in the bulletin about the fact that we’ve acquired some new blood in the backfield (motioning through the choir), drafted a new defensive line – that’s the greeters at door – and a new offensive line – that’s the ushers with the offering plates. Not really – but it’s a fun detour in thinking. But I DO believe the church should always be pondering how it is or is not making connections with people who AREN’T coming to worship.

Our parable tells the story of some who aren’t coming – aren’t coming to the great banquet to which they’ve been invited. It appears they’ve accepted the invitation at first – the host would invite and get an RSVP so he knows how big a pig to roast for the dinner and how many places to set.

But between that first invitation and the notice that the feast is ready, things have changed. It seems everyone now has something better to do. Out pour the excuses.

Now – I need to tell you if you study this passage and read scholars, scholars are all over the map; they disagree on these excuses. Many declare with certainty that those listening to Jesus would have been laughing uproariously at the excuses offered. They’d have known these guests were simply lying, and giving a false gesture of

humility in asking to be excused. Look, no one buys property **sight unseen**. Nobody buys 5 yoke of oxen without having tested their plowing abilities **first**. No one marries **suddenly**, forgetting to note on their calendar they've cross scheduled their honeymoon and your party.<sup>1</sup>

What do you and I do when we get invited to things we don't want to do; or we think are going to be boring, or not worth our time? We make excuses. Sometimes they're lame ones. I remember asking a girl out in high school early in the week, like Monday or Tuesday for Saturday night, and she said, "I think my grandmother's probably going to be sick this weekend." I got the message. Someone once said, an excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie.

But other scholars note these excuses are all GOOD THINGS, suggesting the three who decline the invitation do so because they have attached themselves to the very things that any upstanding citizen in Jesus' day – or in our day – would hope to obtain: security; standing; family; and substance. They all have the same issue – something more pressing has arisen.<sup>2</sup>

The most reliable source of revenue in the day was land. "I'm sorry – I cannot make it to the party. Since you sent out the invitation, I've found myself in the middle of a big real estate deal. I need to close it today. Thanks again."

Another person purchased 10 oxen. Maybe he did try them out at the farm where he bought them, but now wants to get them hooked up for one good dry run at his place – to get them acclimated to working together because the weather looks like it's going to be good first thing in the morning for a full day of plowing. Wanted to give them a good run before we started.

"Since you sent the invitation, our marriage was arranged – (it happened in those days) – we just got back from our honeymoon – so we need to focus on our duties; but thanks so much for asking."

But frankly – does it really matter whether the excuses are good ones or bad ones when you're invited to the banquet? You see, the parable of the Banquet is about a challenge every person in here faces regularly every day. The challenge is about the things we're attached to; the distractions in our lives, the things that cause us to miss the best option, the more important thing in the moment, because we're blinded by our plans, or our directions, or our intentions. We just miss what's right in front of us.

The forces that God's offer is up against in our lives may be silly and self-centered, or they may be reasonable and well argued. But the truth is, God's offer of life at the banquet should have priority not simply over our worst, but also over our BEST agendas.<sup>3</sup> Legitimate excuses or phony ones, excuses have the same net result – missing God's festivities God wants us to enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

So – what am I doing talking to you folks – who ALL accepted the invitation to come to worship today. You didn't turn in any excuses and not show up; you're in the pews today.

I'll tell you why I found this focus. Because the invitation to the banquet isn't just a one-time event. Some interpret this story as the invitation to salvation – the ticket to heaven – and if you refuse, you miss the boat, God will find somebody to take your place. That's a worthy interpretation. I've preached that sermon and countless other have preached that sermon.

For those of us who know the Good News of the Gospel, there's an invitation in this story for each of us into the ways of Kingdom living – available to you and me not just once and for all but every day, every moment, all the time. Every day God's blessings surround us, but because you and I are so occupied with the things we're attached to – the agendas we have set for ourselves, we miss the gifts that are ours every moment.

That's why I put on the bulletin cover this lovely reflection from Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes who's become one of my favorite writers. He writes:

On a gray afternoon  
(it was not supposed to rain)  
after errands to the hardware store  
and messing with a database  
(is this how I mend the world?)  
tired and mindless, at the pace of ennui, (means listlessness, boredom)  
I walk out of the basement office  
into the dreary parking lot  
and there flits onto a dead branch  
a goldfinch—a stray bit of sun,  
yellow alarm, tiny shout of glory—  
and, having made its point, flies off.  
All the way home I breathe,  
*How can I not be grateful?*  
*How can I not be awake?*

The banquet is **here; now; all around us**. For the moment, the invitation to be present in and with it may be all that counts. No excuses – good or bad – are worth missing what God invites you and me to see, to notice, to experience NOW!

A friend introduced me recently to the practice of what's called forest bathing. It sounded odd at first, but has nothing to do with showers or tubs. It's the practice of getting outside – something a lot of us don't do anymore; the average American spends 93% of their time inside a building or a vehicle – and immersing yourself in your surroundings of God's good Creation – particularly wooded areas in this case – and taking it in. It's not a hike. There's no destination other than to be there, to notice, to savor. People are leading these experiences; they are actually becoming certified

forest bathing leaders. Anyway.....forest bathing actually changes your physiology – your body and mind get healthier.

My friend uses this in her morning walks. Noticing the clouds against the sky. The blazing orange of the first leaf to change on a tree. Listening to the singing of the morning birds. Simple gifts of banquet living to start her day. Soaking up the glory of God's creation – breathing in deeply. And sharing what she notices with her friends. After all, isn't that the way we extend an invitation to others to an alternative life we might call banquet living? The life of Banquet living – the joy of belonging to the Creator of the world, by both noticing and sharing who may be to occupied.

Which is a point worth making here. Do you think it's possible that some people have offered excuses for not being in church today – ANY church – because they've not experienced banquet living in faith communities? Not experienced people who notice goldfinches and say, "That's a stray bit of sun, a yellow alarm, a tiny shout of glory?"

Instead, when they've been around people of faith, what they've seen or heard about us is that the party really isn't all that much fun; and we don't exhibit the free-wheeling, abundant hospitality, and outlandish gracefulness of the original host of the banquet. Instead, they've found church people buttoned up, judgmental, rigidly stern and a less than joyful gathering of folks who really appear as if they need a good dose of castor oil.

Erma Bombeck tells of watching a small boy in church. He wasn't gurgling, or spitting, or whispering, or fidgeting, or humming, or kicking, or tearing the hymnbook, or rummaging through his mother's hand bag. He was just standing in the pew, facing the rear, smiling at all the folks in back of him and they were smiling back. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a loud whisper said: "Stop that grinning! We're in church," and with that she gave him a pop on the backside, and as the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added: "That's better" and returned to her prayers.

Ms. Bombeck said "I wanted to grab that child with the tear-stained face and tell him about my God, the happy God, the smiling God, the God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. The God who invites us to live in a kingdom of smiles and notice stray bits of sunshine.

Thankfully, I pastor in a congregation where I see that kind of stuff happen weekly. The warmth of the welcome in the hallways, in the aisles, at the doors – and a multitude of nametags that lets us be a little warmer and friendlier. A spirit of generosity in this congregation which I know will respond again to yet another hurricane. A spirit of generosity when in the last month somebody put up some funds as a challenge to us, leadership responded and some others responded and now members of the congregation have responded and today we're within \$23,000 (started the year \$230,000 in debt) of being debt free as a congregation for the first time since 1991. The kind of engagement and involvement that Joe Norton talked about in the video. It's not just a handful of people who are doing God's work in this place, it's hundreds and

hundreds who are scattered around the community. I can't keep track of all that Westminster is about. And the overflowing, straight-up joyful, banquet living – where 96 people show up for choir rehearsal the first week of September.

But you and I know, there are those occasions where the festival quality is lacking in our lives because we too have turned down the invitation to banquet living in this or that moment because we've gotten too busy, too preoccupied with daily responsibilities, with business, with family, too busy to drink deeply and feast sumptuously. We are focused way out there and miss what's going on here and miss the sheer joy of God's banquet, even and especially in the midst of challenging times.

We forget to be wakeful, and notice the little things God has for us, EVERY DAY – a smile; a color; a sound; a friend who reaches out and holds our hand. We forget to exhibit it in our faces, in our words, through our helpfulness. We excuse ourselves – “No time for that now...gotta run!” And because of that, we may miss the very opportunities to extend God's banquet living invitation to someone who right now is feeling alone on the playground of life – helpless, hopeless, despairing, feeling empty.

You and I know there are headaches and heartaches and backaches and brain aches – but there are also stray bits of sun, yellow alarm, tiny shouts of glory on every corner – EVERY DAY – and you and I are invited not only to rejoice in them – but to invite others to see them too – and in so doing, invite them to the same party – the party of gratitude and wonder and wakefulness we know in the love and grace and joy of Jesus Christ.

You and I are to be stewards of the riches of God's banquet – and do whatever we can to contribute to the festivities – the ministry – a place for children to feel safe and learn about a God who loves them, where teenagers can contemplate the value of empathy without being ridiculed, where people can sing out loud in public and not be embarrassed, where every Sunday there are goodies, and on third Sundays there are free sticky-buns for anyone who wants them, and plenty of free parking, and people who will bring a meal to your house if you have surgery – not because they're your friends but because they have tasted the feast and want to share its goodness with you.

**It's kick-off Sunday.** So friends – let's be filled with wonder, gratitude and wakefulness that we are invited every day of our lives – every single moment of every day to such a glorious banquet. Let the game begin!! AMEN.

1. Wes Avram, sermon on the text.
2. Feasting on the Word, Mark Ralls
3. Craddock, Interpretation Commentary on Luke
4. Capon, Grace, Judgement and ??