

The Great Banquet

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Date: 30 August 2015

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[0 : 0 0] Jen, which is my wife, I'm Dan, we were binge-watching TV Friday night. Early in season three of Homeland, there's an awkward dinner scene with a judgmental grandmother, and it made me think how you find awkward dinner scenes all over TV and film and literature, right?

And like the ones that come to my mind immediately, like scenes from Downton Abbey or anything with Ricky Gervais, and American Beauty, there's a great scene in Borat, so I hear.

Not that I've seen it or own it. I also think of the Master Commander book series, they made a film of it, Lucky Jack Aubrey is the captain, really amazing sailor, but a total buffoon in social situations and screws up every meal he's in.

And these awkward dinner scenes are ubiquitous all throughout fiction and literature, because they take place all the time in real life, right?

They're totally believable. And, well, then I immediately think of the time my parents met Jennifer. They came to Akron, Ohio to see my graduate recital.

[1 : 1 4] That occurred in the previous millennium. And it was their first chance to meet Jennifer, who I had been seriously dating, the first time I'd ever met or first time I'd ever introduced a girl to my parents.

And we sit down at the restaurant, order our food, and my dad, my dear late father, who wasn't the most socially graceful person I've ever known, and he asks Jennifer, so what's your GPA?

Now, honestly, you know, I didn't even realize how awkward that made things, or how awkward that made Jennifer feel, because I grew up with my dad saying awkward things in public all the time.

And I think for those of us who have, in a similar way, for those of us who have heard and read a lot of stories about Jesus, we forget how he makes some situations extremely uncomfortable, but not because he lacks social grace.

I mean, he has a purpose. In TV and film, awkward dinner scenes are used to further character development and relationships, heightened attention for the plot. And Jesus, too, uses this heated, cringeworthy dinner experience to teach us something very important about the kingdom of God.

[2 : 3 2] He says, The kingdom is a feast. This kingdom has come, and those who would have been expected to receive the kingdom did not do so, whereas the ones least likely to receive the kingdom actually did.

The invitation to the feast is an invitation to belief. So we're going to look first at that invitation, and then we're going to look at the obstacles to believing, and then we'll look at the end, or the goal of belief.

The invitation to belief, the obstacles to belief, and the goal of belief. So let's first look at what has led up to this point in the passage.

The very beginning of Luke chapter 14, we learn that Jesus is a guest at a dinner at the home of one of the Pharisees. Now, Pharisees were a religious slash political party.

They took very seriously the rules and laws and regulations for the people of Israel. And obeying these rules was their way of expressing their love for God.

[3 : 42] But over time, new rules piled on more new rules, and it became very difficult to keep them all. And the rules became a way of excluding those who were on the margins. This would be Gentiles, women, children, the sick, the poor, the lame.

So this dinner that Jesus is at is occurring on the Sabbath, or Saturday, which was a sacred day. Every week, it was a sacred day of rest for Israel.

There's very strict rules about what you can and can't do on the Sabbath. And one of those things that you cannot do is to heal. You can't heal on the Sabbath. Now, someone somehow came into the house who had dropsy.

His torso would have been bulging full with liquids, fluids. He probably had organ failure. He probably would have been terminally ill.

And Jesus has compassion on this man. But first, Jesus asked the Pharisees on the Sabbath, is it lawful to heal this man or not? They don't answer.

[4 : 45] And you could probably hear a pin drop and crickets and such. And we can assume it was an awkward silence. And then Jesus miraculously heals the man. He sends him away.

And he says to the Pharisees, Now which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out? And he drops the mic.

Then he decides to confront all the dinner guests who had scrambled for the places of honor. And he chides them for their arrogance in doing so.

And then to be complete, in verse 12, where we start this evening, he makes sure everyone in the room feels insulted. And he turns on the host and blasts him for only inviting respectful people with the expectation that the host would receive similar invitations from those respectful people later on.

So, now, everyone feels equally offended. And to highlight how awkward this gets, Luke does us a favor and he shows us in the text, in verse 15, one of the guests trying to say something that will break the tension or lighten the mood or to change the topic, he says, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

[6 : 02] Pass the hummus or something. And then Jesus says, Thank you, I'm glad you brought up the kingdom. And then he shares this parable, the parable of the banquet.

Now, in the parable, the invitation to the banquet is the invitation to enter the kingdom and into relationship with the Father. To accept that invitation is to believe.

That's what we learn in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, and this letter is in the Bible, it's called Romans. Paul writes, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

For with the heart one believes and is justified. And with the mouth one confesses and is saved. In the book of Acts, Paul, the same, and Silas were in jail in Philippi.

And the jailer asks them, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.

[7 : 09] Now, in this parable, there's two separate groups. There's the group that refuse the invitation to the banquet, and then there's the ones who are ultimately invited, and they come to the banquet.

The first group is the group you would expect to have accepted this invitation. And we can infer that Jesus is referring to the religious leaders, the insiders, the respectable ones, the ones that at the time seemed closest to the kingdom.

But in the end, it's the outcasts who accept. Now, the Pharisees would not have missed this. The crippled, the lame, the blemished were forbidden to go behind the veil that cordoned off what's called the Holy of Holies.

It was the deepest place in the temple in Jerusalem, and it was where the presence of God dwelled, and those with blemishes were not allowed there. But Jesus says that now everyone has access, which is great.

That's you and me. The Father has no prejudices. Anyone can come as they are, even as an utterly poor, utterly sinful, and utterly unlovable person who cannot understand what God can see in him.

[8 : 23] The fact is, there isn't anything in anyone that makes him worthy to be a member of God's family. But God makes him, God makes something of him or her.

He makes that person his beloved child. So, which group do we belong to? Well, the fact that we're sitting here in church worshiping God makes us religious insiders.

So, we should read this parable and hear a warning to earnestly follow God without lame excuses. And I'll get to those excuses in a minute.

But if we've already accepted God's invitation, if we are God's children, then that makes us the second group, doesn't it? Like, we are the lame, the crippled, the blemished.

This parable reminds us that we are nothing apart from God's grace. We were outcasts and aliens, deeply blemished. And only through God's gracious invitation are we made members of his family and of his kingdom.

[9 : 32] And when we understand that fact, it gives us the power to show grace and the power to show hospitality, the kind of hospitality that Jesus admonished his dinner host to have in verse 12.

Now, as an aside, but this is an important aside, this is one of many places in the Bible where hospitality is linked with justice. Do we want to extend justice and mercy to the world's disenfranchised and outcasts?

Well, extending that justice and mercy means having them in our home at our dinner table. Do we think Advent should be a church that is more welcoming and diverse at 5 p.m.

on Sundays? Yeah, and it should be, absolutely. But how diverse are our dining rooms at 7 p.m. on weekdays?

this conjoining of hospitality and mercy, by the way, is one of the key organizing principles for our core groups.

[10 : 45] Our core groups are structured to be a place of welcome to outsiders, a place we can invite people into the life of our community. And this is how we show hospitality as a church, one of many ways.

So, we've seen that people of all types are invited, but not everyone accepts the invitation to the banquet.

Now, you may have found the excuses in the parable kind of musing. I kind of expected Tommy to chuckle as he read him. They're meant to be so. They're meant to be absurd.

Jesus is making a point. He's ultimately saying that every excuse we would give for not entering the kingdom is pretty lame. But those excuses spring from somewhere, right?

And so, having looked at the invitation to belief, I'd like to now look at obstacles to belief. I'd like to look at two obstacles, namely, our own desires and our own assumptions.

[11 : 45] You'll notice that these excuses have to do with possessions and affections. Do these people refuse the invitation because of skewed thinking?

No. That's not right at all. The reason they rejected the invitation is that they have skewed desires. They didn't desire to be with the host.

They didn't desire all the great stuff that the host would have given them at the banquet. They had disordered loves. This is why true belief is to be accompanied by true repentance.

In the book of Acts, when the apostle Peter is asked how to accept God's invitation, we heard it earlier tonight, Peter answers, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So now in our passage in Luke, when the host sends out his servants inviting us to the banquet, inviting us to the banquet, the servants aren't going to tap on the screen door.

[12 : 54] They're going to knock on the thickest, concrete, steel-reinforced wall of our house. Accepting God's invitation and living as members of his kingdom means tearing down those walls, giving up those things that we love more than God, the simple things, even the good things that we make idols out of.

But in our modern age, there's something that informs both our desires and our beliefs. And this is the second obstacle to belief.

You could say it's our culture or it's our assumptions or it's our presuppositions. Perhaps the best word for this is to call it an imaginary, a social imaginary.

Because of the culture we live in, art, media, education, politics, with all of its background assumptions and narratives, we, all of us, believers and skeptics alike, for the most part, imagine the world the same way.

Our social imaginary is the stuff we assume about the world before we think reflectively on it. We absorb it from birth. We swim in it every day of our lives.

[14 : 20] And it's difficult to imagine the world otherwise. It's what it means to live in the West. Our imaginary has a big influence on our beliefs and our actions and our desires.

This imaginary is a source of constant cross-pressure for beliefs and skeptics alike. So for Christians, it means often we experience doubt.

500 years ago in the West, it would be very difficult to not believe in the transcendent, but now Christianity bears the burden of proof instead of being the given. Our culture now presents a way of looking at the world where it's possible to do life without God.

As a matter of fact, our culture has thrown off God completely and thrown off everything else that might claim an external authority over our lives, whether it be the Bible or the church, etc.

Our culture would say the highest authority is the self. This way of imagining the world is the ocean we swim in. It's unavoidable and there's no going back and we're exposed to it from birth.

[15 : 28] So take my boys as an example. Now, there's a lot of things I could have used as an example of this, but I'm going back to when we were children. I'm taking their child as an example.

At dinner time, our family often goes through the children's catechism. And the first four questions of the catechism are who made you? God.

What else did God make? God made everything. Why did God make you and everything else? For his own glory. That's my favorite part when my five-year-old says that.

Now, how can we glorify, how can you glorify God? And the answer is by loving him and by doing what he commands. Very simple. And so, as a family, we tell ourselves during dinner that we have an outside authority, an external authority, and that's God.

But before dinner even starts, it wouldn't be uncommon for us to turn on the TV or the neglect division, as we call it, at our house, and for the kids to watch one of their favorite shows, which happens to be Pokemon.

[16 : 39] Did anybody watch? No, I'm not. Okay. All right. And so, there's very different Pokemon shows, and one of the theme songs for this particular show goes like this.

And listen carefully. It's not always right or wrong as long as your spirit's strong. It's not always win or lose. It's the road you choose.

The answer is within. It's not always black and white, but your heart always knows what's right. Let the journey begin.

Pokemon! That's... Just something for all you and nephews and godsons and boys to look forward to. Girls might watch us. I wouldn't know. I only have boys.

So, we grew up with this constant tension between exclusive humanism and our faith.

[17 : 42] And you could say, well, Dan, why don't you just have your boys watch something else? Fair. Yeah, maybe we could, but you can't escape this. If you grew up anywhere west of the Ural Mountains, you are going to get this from birth.

this tension between exclusive humanism and our faith often causes doubt in every one of us. And I think we can all empathize with that.

And it's an obstacle to belief for all of us. And then faithfulness, so then, faithfulness requires practices like prayer and scripture reading, contemplation, confession, tithing, fasting that regularly shape, regularly shape our imaginations and our desires so that we, as Christians, would desire the love of Christ above all things.

Now, if you're a skeptic, you may have suspected that it works the other way as well. for you too. You too live in this cross-pressure.

That though the West has thrown off God and religion and moral absolutes and replaced all of that with a different set of assumptions about the universe and meaning and human purpose, that the transcendence still haunts our imaginations and it's difficult to account for it.

[19 : 23] But it's there, right? And it often feels like a sense of loss. If you're a skeptic and you're haunted by this sense of transcendence, it perhaps feels like the first line of Julian Barnes' memoir, the first sentence is, I don't believe in God, but I miss him.

Isn't that great? I don't believe in God, but I miss him. Or perhaps you feel the tension that Maurice Sendak felt at the end of his life. Do you know who that is?

He wrote *Where the Wild Things Are*, a committed atheist. And in an interview with Terry Gross, he was reflecting on all the people he's loved and who had died in his life.

And you have to hear this. He says this with tears and with like a deep fragility. He says, I don't believe in an afterlife, but I still fully expect to see my brother again.

It's just heartbreaking to me to like see and feel that tension, but that's the tension between the imminence and the transcendence. I don't believe in an afterlife.

[20 : 33] I'm a complete atheist, but somehow I feel like I'll see my brother again. Do you feel that cross pressure?

I think everyone in this room, everyone in this room feels it. All the time. Whether we subscribe to the Christian faith or are skeptical of it.

we all share the same imaginary and it's an obstacle to belief that we need to take very seriously. Jesus would contest not just our worldviews, like what we think about the world, but he would contest our culture's imaginary.

And he would present a different one. He doesn't do it through definitions and propositions. He gives us pictures and he gives us stories. He gives us parables so that we would not just think differently, but that we would imagine differently and desire differently.

This is, by the way, why we've entitled this sermon series Imagining the Kingdom and not explaining the kingdom or defining the kingdom.

[21 : 44] The kingdom is a field in which seed is sown. The kingdom is a vineyard. It's a pearl of great price.

It's a tiny mustard seed. It's a banquet. At the center of this imaginary that Jesus presents is the king.

And this is our third point, that God, the king himself, is the end or he's the goal or he's the telos of our belief. He's the sower in the field.

He's the master of the vineyard. He's the host at the banquet. At its core, the kingdom of God is not a state or condition of this world, not an ideal order of nations in life, but the kingdom centers around a person, the king, God himself, who is the source and sustainer of everything that happens.

For us, who are members of the kingdom, he is what we desire more than anything. For those of us here who are skeptics, I would suggest he is the one.

[22 : 53] He is what haunts your imaginary. He is the transcendent. He is what is ultimately beautiful. He is behind the beauty that for some reason makes us catch our breath when we see a stunning landscape.

He is behind the beauty that makes us weep when we hear a Mahler symphony or see a riveting film. His Holy Spirit is the well of spirituality that we crave when we realize there has to be more than just this material world.

And he is why we crave justice. Because we know instinctively that there's something broken about this world and it requires somebody like him to fix it and to set the world to write.

And that is the story of the universe. The story that must be true as J.R.R. Tolkien says because it is the most beautiful of all fairy tales.

It's the story that we tell every week when we gather here and celebrate this meal together. It's this story.

[24 : 03] The world was created perfect and we were created to enjoy God. But we rebelled against God and that broke everything.

Ourselves, our connection to the Father, our connections with each other, the environment, as Radiohead sang, everything is broken.

but through the life, death, and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ, we are restored to God. And through his Holy Spirit, we are made into new creations and are promised a world that will one day be made new again, a new heavens and a new earth where there will be a banquet with the Father that will last into eternity.

This is what he invites all of us to. If you've never accepted that invitation but would like to, please talk to me or to Tommy or to any of our prayer ministers who stand up here during communion.

We would love to pray with you and to talk you through how to accept that invitation. Let's accept that invitation to join him at his banquet right now.

[25 : 25] Let's pray. Father, we do look forward to celebrating with you throughout all eternity in the new heavens and new earth, everything having been made new, all tears wiped away, our sins wiped away forever, death conquered, a lifetime of joy, peace, no war, no refugee crises, no refugees stuck in a van in Austria or washing a shore in Libya, no random shootings at gas stations or on news broadcasts, a world made new.

God, that's the story that we cling to as your children. We thank you that you made that possible through your son Jesus, through his life, his death, his resurrection.

We celebrate that now at this table. Thank you for inviting us. We gladly accept your invitation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Would you see Quindi■■■■■ B