

A Tale of Two Feasts

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Date: 04 September 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening again. This is our last sermon in a series. We've been looking at hospitality. And we've looked at how hospitality is one of the foundational or fundamental activities of God.

And we've looked at how the gospel is inherently hospitable, inherently drawing in. We've also seen how, as a result of who God is, Christians should be hospitable. And we've looked at the idea of hospitality as a motif, or the idea of the table as this motif that the Bible keeps coming back to, to use as a picture to convey huge biblical truths. So it's been great. That's actually the case for our texts tonight. So in our final passage in hospitality, we're looking at Mark 6. And here we have the story of two banquets, two acts of hospitality, two feasts. And in both stories, we have a king who feeds a large group of people. And one of them is a tragedy. One story is a tragedy. One story is just completely grim. And the other story is wonderfully hopeful. Now, interestingly, the Bible puts both of these stories beside each other. Because we're supposed to see some kind of contrast between these two feedings. And we're going to talk about that. But first, what we'll do is we'll look at each story individually.

So here we go. Let's begin with Herod's little party here. And I think this is one of the most tragic stories in the New Testament. Herod, as you heard, he's this very conflicted man.

It's not like, Herod's bad. That's, you know, that's not like the whole point of it, right? He's this very conflicted man. He's got this inner battle going on. And ultimately, he chose death over life. And I think Mark is simply saying, don't let this happen to you. Don't live like Herod. So we'll take a closer look at this, all right? So Herod was a ruler, the ruler of Judea.

And he was part of a family dynasty that had ruled for a long time. So this is the ancient equivalent of like the Bushes or the Kennedys or something like that, right? And he'd lived this very privileged life. So the world that he inhabited, his world, was all about power.

[2 : 27] And it was real power. It was real power. As an example, he could indulge his desires with seemingly few consequences. At first, anyway. For example, on a family holiday, he liked the look of his brother's wife. So he disposed of his own wife and took her. And no one really said anything about it, except John the Baptist, who very courageously said to him, this is wrong.

What you're doing is very wrong. And of course, the new wife didn't like this, because it would seem that she rather enjoyed being married to a king. So to becate her and sort of protect John, Herod imprisoned John. But he didn't kill John. Why? Because Herod was fascinated by this man.

And this is where the story gets really interesting, I think. Herod, the passage says, feared John, but loved listening to him. So he would either get John up or Herod would sneak down into the dungeons and listen to John just preach to him. And he loved his preaching. But it does say that Herod was perplexed by it. And the word means, literally means he was divided. His heart was divided.

So on the one hand, Herod is listening to the words of God through John, and he finds it fascinating. And because it's the word of God, it rings true in his heart. And on the other hand, Herod's got this really great life. He can do whatever he wants. He can snap his fingers and things happen.

Why would he want to mess with that? That's what he's thinking. So he's got these two things going on in his heart. He's a divided man. I'm told that there's only one place in the Lord of the Rings that would bring the author, Tolkien, to tears when he read it. And it's the scene where Sam and Frodo are sleeping in Gollum's... He's about to lead them into the lair of the giant spider. And right before that, something happens in Gollum's heart. He looks at Frodo, who's been very, very kind to him.

[4 : 42] And he starts to relent. And he starts to think, I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't lead them to their death. And in the scene, he reaches out to touch Frodo's hand, to sort of caress his hand.

And very unfortunately, at that exact moment, Sam wakes up, sees what's going on, accuses him of sort of foul play. And at that point, Gollum sort of uses that accusation to return to his original plan, of getting rid of these guys. I mean, it's a really tragic moment in the book. You've got this Gollum who has this divided heart at that moment. And he has these two paths before him.

And he chooses wrong. Herod's moment of choice comes in our story here. And it's a really weird story.

So Herod is the head of state. And, you know, one of the jobs of heads of state is to keep important people happy. So he throws these parties, these banquets. This is his birthday.

So he throws a birthday party, invites all these key players. It's a very indulgent affair. I mean, he gets his wife's daughter to dance for all his mates, which it just sounds, it does sound creepy, doesn't it? Like, and it wasn't like a high school, you know, jazz ballet recital kind of thing. The Greek indicates that this was a fairly saucy sort of thing going on here, right? And Herod, who is likely a little bit drunk at this point, and, you know, fairly into this dancing, is like, right, in a show of kind of power and obvious stupidity, kind of, you know, ah, come on. I love you guys. You know. Girl, I'll give you anything you want.

[6 : 33] You're fantastic. I'll give you anything you want. All his mates are slapping him on the back. You're the man, Herod. But it all goes a bit sideways, obviously, here. The mother, Herod's wife, sees a chance and gets the girl to ask for John's head on a platter. And Herod has a decision to make at this point. Soren Kierkegaard says that sin is building your identity on anything besides God. He says, basically saying sort of at the heart of all our lives is a saviour. That saviour should be Jesus, but it could also be power. It could also be approval. It could be a particular cause. But there's something there that drives you more than anything else. And whatever it is, you're a slave to it. And Herod, most likely, I think, was probably captivated. His heart was captivated by power. And maintaining that power was of primary importance to him. More important than anything else is holding on to power. So despite the fact that he loved John's teaching, and despite the fact that he knew John was righteous and holy, the passage says, Herod's greatest fear was losing face in front of all his powerful friends. That would undermine his own authority. That ruled his heart. So he acted against his conscience and murdered this innocent man. Now, if Herod had been following Jesus, if he had a life built on the fear of God, he could have done what he actually should have done and what he wanted to do, probably. But he didn't. So he orders his men to execute John. So there you go. That's Herod's little party. And it is a very grim sort of story. Now, let's look at the other feast, the other banquet now, the one that Jesus presides over. But you'll see the contrast straight away. This feast, this banquet is not held in a palace. It's held on a field. There's no thrones. People are, everyone's sitting on the grass. The invite is not restricted to generals and nobles. Everyone is invited.

The point of the feast is not to boost Jesus' standing, but to minister to the crowds. There's sending in both stories. Herod sends his men to kill. Jesus sends his men to serve and feed. Christ's driving emotion is compassion. Herod's driving emotion is fear. Now, let's look at this feeding of the 5,000. It's a fantastic story. And it does suffer, unfortunately, I think, because it's a bit overly familiar to us. You kind of have it in the back of your mind as this kind of lovely Jesus has a picnic kind of story. You know, kids, three-legged races and gingham blankets and fish sandwiches or something, right? But Mark's version here doesn't let us kind of have that picture of this event because there's quite an edge to the story. One of them, obviously, is the fact that it's placed immediately after the death party, or whatever you call it, you know, the death party. Also, there's conflict in the story. So, as he says, you can't reduce the story to, Jesus is a great guy. He feeds hungry people. He can do magic. Like, you know, it's not, that's not a summary of a story. So, we'll get stuck into it, and we'll see what's going on here. So, verse 30 to 31 here. So, Jesus' disciples have returned from a mission. Jesus sent them out. They're coming back. They're probably exhilarated. They're probably amped, and they would have been huddled together, talking it up, telling each other stories about their adventures. How about that guy that had the thing? I don't know, you know. And I prayed, and it fell off, and I stepped, you know, I don't know. You know, like, they would have been, like, telling these great stories about what they've been up to, exhilarated and exhausted. Now, the problem is this, is all these folks that had been listening to the disciples had just started, just followed them. So, the disciples want a break, and there's, you know, thousands of people sort of just started following them. So, Jesus says, well, let's jump in a boat to a desolate place for a rest. So, they did. So, they find a desolate place, verses 32 to 34. And by the way, that's the second time that word desolate

place is mentioned there. We'll come back to it. It's important. But the crowd see where they're headed, and amazingly beat them to their, their kind of rest stop, right? And then there's this lovely line that Jesus says, he saw the crowd, and he had compassion on them. And he has this phrase. He goes, they were like a sheep without a shepherd, he says. That's Jesus diagnosing their state. That's important. We'll come back to that. So, Jesus has compassion, but he's really tired. They're all tired. But he teaches them anyway, and it says he teaches them many things, which is awesome. And I'm sure the disciples are thinking, come on. Just, Jesus, why don't you just put them in groups and give them some conversation starters or something, or, you know, self-guided Bible study. It's pretty clear the disciples are exhausted. But no, Jesus gives them the good stuff. Now, remember the things you have to remember. Sheep, shepherd, desolate place. We'll come back to those. Then the disciples, then the disciples say, Jesus, this is a desolate place, that word again. It's getting late. Send them away for food. And I'll read verse 37 to you. But he answered them, that's Jesus. Answer them, you give them something to eat. And they said to him, oh, what should we do? What do we do? That's actually in the Greek. What do we do? And I'm a biblical scholar. You have to trust me on this. It's like 200 cenarii. And Jesus says, basically, he says to them, if you're worried about, if you're so worried about them, you sort it out. And the emphasis in the Greek is, you do it. And they go, it's impossible. [12:46] We can't do this. It's impossible. Jesus ignores that and sends them off anyway to find out how much food there is already. Not much, as it turns out. Then he gets the crowds to sit in groups of 50s and hundreds. Remember that. We'll come back to that. And then he blesses the food. The disciples hand out the food, which is miraculously multiplied. You should remember that too. We'll come back to that. And they're all satisfied. Right. What are the things I said you should remember? So one, a desolate place. Mentioned a lot of times. Desolate place. Two, sheep without a shepherd. Three, people organized in groups, 50s and hundreds. Four, miraculous feeding of lots of people. So why remember these things? Because it's all Old Testament imagery, specifically relating to the Exodus story. So God's people, if you don't know this, God's people were slaves in Egypt. God helps them escape, gets them out of that situation. They're in a desert for a really long period of time.

And that desert, that's the desolate place imagery. God feeds them miraculously. A whole bunch of people he feeds miraculously with bread from heaven. That's the miraculous feeding. Moses, in Exodus 18, is told to organize the people in groups. Thousands, hundreds, fifties, tens. In verse 27, Moses is in, sorry, in Numbers 27, Moses is nearing the end of his life. And he prays that God would give the people a new leader so that they wouldn't be like sheep without a shepherd. So it's all of this Old Testament imagery going on in the story of feeding of the 5,000. And Jesus is saying, I am the guy that Moses prayed for. I am the Messiah the Old Testament promised would come. He's saying, as God freed those Exodus people, I'm going to free and feed you folks spiritually. That's the big story of the feeding of the 5,000. But there's more. It's not the only thing going on here. Because you have to ask yourself, why does Mark include all of this extended interaction with the disciples? Why bother involving them at all? Why doesn't Jesus do an Elvis Dumbledore and just go, feed now? And like plates fall from the sky. Why involve the disciples? Because Jesus wants to teach the disciples something. He wants to teach them about mission. He wants to teach them about reaching the world. Let me say that all again using different words. Okay. So the disciples say, these people are hungry. There's nothing we can do about them. Send them away, Jesus. And Jesus says, you do it. You sort it out.

See, again, the story doesn't need those details if the main point is only Jesus is the Messiah the Old Testament speaks about. It is about that, but it's about more. And those details tell us what else is going on here. See, this is a teaching moment for the disciples and a teaching moment for us. Jesus asks the disciples to do something that is impossible. Why? Knowing that they'll say, oh, I can't do it. Why? Because one, it's a revealing question, isn't it? It's a very revealing question. It exposes the disciples' lack of belief. It's impossible, they say, we don't have the resources. They're saying that to a man who had just calmed a storm, released a demoniac of a billion demons, had healed tons of people, had raised a little girl from the dead. They're saying, oh, we can't, we can't find enough food. So it's a revealing question too. It's a calling. Jesus is calling his disciples to feed these wandering, leaderless people. You do the mission, Jesus says.

It's obvious the disciples did not get any of this. They should have said, yes, Lord, we'll feed them. Show us what to do. Show us how to do this. But that wasn't happening.

[17 : 04] But Jesus put them to work anyway. It's this wonderful moment of grace, I think. They're like, oh, I can't do it. We don't know what to do. Jesus says, well, for a start, why don't you go see just how much food there is? Just, you know, let's just see what we're working with right now. And it turns out there's like five loaves and two fish. You know the story.

And then it says Jesus gets the disciples to hand out the multiply food. Then he gets the disciples to collect the 12 baskets of leftovers. There are other ways to do this. Why this way?

I know I'm laboring this point, but it's really important. These disciples who didn't get what Jesus was about, who thought feeding the 5,000 was impossible, who should have known better given the history of Jesus. These people, Jesus still used them.

He still grabbed a hold of them and said, you play a role in this. You play a significant role in this. Just to drive this point home, a reminder of something that might not be obvious in the story. Most of the people in the crowd did not know a miracle happens. The story is not like all of a sudden 5,000 people freaking out because all the food was miraculously multiplied.

They just know that they've got some fish and stuff. The only people who really know the miracle happened were the disciples. I think the whole thing's for the benefit of the disciples. So this is partly what the feeding of the 5,000 is about.

[18 : 33] And let me just give you a few take-homes here. So again, the main point is Jesus is the Messiah, the Old Testament promised. That's the big point.

The secondary point, though, is God calls His disciples to mission. God calls His people out into the world. And God calls us to mission, to look beyond our church walls, to the world around us.

And the right response is not, it's too hard. It costs too much. The right response is, God, help us.

The right response is, mission is hard, but God, you are with us.

It's especially hard in a place like Vancouver. But God's grace for this task that He calls us to is not just sufficient. It's overflowing. It's abundant. That's why there's this little detail about the 12 baskets of leftovers.

Have you ever wondered about that? That's kind of random. That doesn't need to be in the story, does it? Yes, it does, because it says to this, it says, Christ's ability to meet the needs of His people should never be in doubt.

[19 : 40] Jesus calls His disciples to do something impossible, and they don't just get by. They don't just scrape through. There is abundant grace for the task. God abundantly supplies.

That's why we have this picture of the leftovers. Folks, the mission of the church is difficult. It is difficult to preach. It is difficult to share your faith in whatever situation you find yourself in.

It is difficult to offer to pray for your friends who don't know Jesus. It is hard seeking reconciliation. It is difficult being invitational. It is difficult working out what it means to be a Christian in your spheres of influence.

It is tough making disciples. It is hard. But Jesus is with you, and His grace is more than enough. Now, let's wrap this up here.

So, we've looked at two stories tonight. Two stories side by side. Two banquets. Two acts of hospitality. And they bring before us two visions for how life should be lived.

[20 : 46] Herod's story. It's life with a divided heart. A heart that is sympathetic to the teachings of Jesus. It's like, that's Jesus stuff. That's interesting.

I like to think about that. But ultimately, it's a heart that says, no, me. I am the king of my own life. I'll do what I want.

Folks, the fruit of that life, the story says, is death. And the author saying, to quite a popular mean, this is Herod. Don't be like Herod.

And the next story. The next. What life looks like following Jesus. Where Jesus is, the king of your heart, the lord of your heart. It's the life where Jesus calls us into action.

Into the great adventure. And it is. The great adventure of being part of God's plan to see the world redeemed. And reconciled.

[21 : 44] And made new. And we can be, folks, you know, we can be useless. And we can not really get it. And we can trip up and not understand stuff. But God will still use you for his purposes.

And his grace is sufficient. In fact, it's more than sufficient. It is abundant for the task at hand. Amen.