



I Can't Make It: You Won't Believe What Happened

TEXT
Luke 14:15-24

July 24, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Both Matthew and Luke tell this story. Those invited to the great dinner don't make it, but the host goes out into the street to bring in the blind, the lame, the homeless. Matthew tells us of the poor guy who gets kicked out of the wedding banquet because he has no wedding garment. Do you remember that?

Luke leaves that detail out of the story. But Luke tells us about the excuses the invited guests offer. I wonder why these folks didn't want to go to this great dinner?

Oh, I'm making some assumptions saying they didn't want to go. The text doesn't say that ... not explicitly. The text says they had things come up. That happens.

"Sorry, I can't make it. I just bought some property."

"Please send my regrets to the host; I bought five yoke of oxen, and I need to give them a test drive."

"I wish I could be there, but I just got married, and I will be at the reception. Poor timing — I'm sure you understand."

It happens. Things come up.

Carol and I were going to a birthday party for a friend recently. It was a Saturday night,

and I had a wedding. So we were going to stop by after the wedding. We drove over to our friend's house. We were already about a half hour late.

We pulled up to the house. It was dark. There were no cars in the driveway. By the door was one sad balloon, hanging rather limply. It was then that I realized we weren't a half hour late; we were a day late. That's the worst. I wish I had an excuse. "Sorry we missed the party; I just bought some oxen, and you know how that is." No, I just wrote down the wrong day.

Fred Craddock, a great student of the texts, says these are no ordinary excuses like faulty alarm clocks, homework-eating dogs or traffic jams. The excuses echo reasons that allow faithful Jews to be excused from going to war.¹

But others say, "Wait a minute, these excuses make no sense." No one buys property without inspecting it first. "I'm sorry I can't make your party. I have bought a house, and I want to go over and see how many bedrooms it has." No one does that. The same with oxen. Five yoke of oxen — that's quite a purchase.

"Sorry to miss your party. I bought a new car, and I need to

go find out what kind it is." No, you test drive it first.

And a wedding ... weddings were planned months, sometimes years in advance. "I'm sorry I can't attend. I just remembered today that your party is the same day as my wedding. Oops!"

Some say these excuses are ridiculous. I don't know. But I'll tell you what I think: I think these excuses show that they didn't want to go to this dinner.

New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper says, "Excuses accuse us as well; because they reveal our true priorities."² If that is the case, and I think it is, they didn't want to go to this dinner. Why would anyone not want to attend God's dinner?

Remember, "dinner" is a metaphor. What Jesus is talking about is the kingdom of God. If I understand the text, this story is probing why, then and now, some people want to participate in God's kingdom, want to follow Jesus, and some people don't. And more to the point, even those who *do* don't want to follow Jesus all the time.

Why? Let me offer just a couple reflections on why I think, in our society, sometimes we choose to skip this dinner.

The guests in the story decided that they wanted to create

their kingdoms. *I've got fields, and I've got oxen, and I've got my own wedding dinner I can go to. I can build my world. I can construct a life that works for me. I will include faith, as long as faith works for me, makes sense to me. I prefer my kingdom to yours.*

Why? *Because I can live in a world that makes sense to me.* We all want that. We all want the world to make sense to us.

But in God's kingdom, there is mystery; there is wonder. One thing that is not served in God's great dinner is certainty. I think we crave certainty.

"Are you sure about that?" That's what my high school history teacher, Mrs. Hurst, would ask. I would say something like "Abraham Lincoln was the best president ever."

"Are you sure about that?" she would ask. She wanted me to make my case as to why I thought so, but I hated that question. I hated it because I have an eternal-internal "second-guesser."

I said, "Yes, I am certain about that — final answer." But inside there was a small panic attack going on because the very fact that she asked me if I was sure about it made me wonder if I was sure about it — and I didn't like that feeling.

I don't know. Maybe he wasn't the best president. Maybe it was Zachary Taylor. I was a mess.

Mrs. Hurst taught me some history; she was good at that. But she also taught me that I don't like uncertainty.

The Republicans had their convention this past week. The

Democrats' will be this week. One thing we heard, and we will hear again, is certainty. They know exactly what is wrong, and they know exactly how to fix things. And of course the other side is somewhere between stupid and demonic, so they all know who to blame. They are certain — and we love it. We want certainty.

I admit that I wish we lived in a world where the problems that we face were simple enough that we could face them with certainty — but that's a deception, an illusion. Even when there is a part of us that is not so sure, we choose to make uncertain things certain. We choose to reduce mystery to knowledge and wonder to factoids.

We want to be certain. But then there is God — whose way and life and being is beyond our capacity to be certain. With God, we are left to deal with mystery and wonder.

I have a brother, Gene, whom I have told you about. He is mentally handicapped. He has a great heart and would have been a better pastor than I am, but he couldn't pass the first grade.

For a long time, I wanted answers. I wanted a reason, something to make sense of his circumstance. But there are no answers. There are no reasons. Some say everything happens for a reason. Don't tell me that; I don't believe it. Sometimes there is just chaos; there is mystery. Sometimes certainty is ever-elusive.

Not everything — like suffering or beauty or love — can be reduced to factoids. To be

at God's dinner is to live with mystery. There is no certainty served at God's dinner. But there is something even more difficult.

This great dinner did not look like a fundraiser at a hotel ballroom where all the guests are in expensive shoes. This great dinner looked like all our food pantry clients were dining together. The folks at this dinner were not there because of who they were, but because of who the host was. What is served at this dinner is grace.

To fully understand this, we want to remember that in Jesus' day, when you gave a great dinner, you made sure you invited people who were worthy of your dinner. You made sure you invited people who might invite you to their great dinner some day. It was an ethic of reciprocity.

If you brought a plate of cookies to my grandmother: "Here, Martha, just some cookies. I know you were in the hospital ... a little surgery ... just some cookies." Within days, she would return the plate — with a pound cake on it. If you ever brought my grandmother some cookies, you would show a profit! It's an ethic of reciprocity. That's just the way it was done. We all do that.

In Jesus' day, it was the same way. If you were giving a great dinner, you invited folks who could reciprocate. One scholar has said, "This ethic of reciprocity ensured that 'gifts ... were never free,' but were given and received with either explicit or implicit strings attached."³

So the stunning moment in Jesus' story is that our host

sets all of this aside. All of his guests were people of means. They could afford oxen and fields — and if you have thrown a wedding lately, you know it can set you back. In other words, our host invited the people who had status. They were folks who could improve his status; they could reciprocate.

But this dinner party takes on a whole new protocol. It is governed by the etiquette of a different kingdom. Rather than feed the overfed because they can reciprocate, this host invites those who cannot reciprocate.

“Go out ... and bring in the lame and the blind and the poor.” There’s no reciprocity; there’s just grace. Well, that’s great, right? We love grace, right? Of course we do — most of the time. The thing about grace is that grace doesn’t care about accomplishment. Grace doesn’t take time to read our resume.

We are invited to the dinner — not because of who we are, but because of who God is. It’s humbling. Our culture doesn’t do humility well.

I was in seminary, and I was doing a summer internship in the mountains of western Virginia. Someone called the church and said that David and Debbie Smith were having their baby. Could I come to the hospital? I drove to the hospital and found David pacing in the waiting room. When I walked in, he grabbed my hand, so we paced together. He said, “I was back there with Debbie, but she kicked me out because I was too nervous. Can you believe that?”

The nurse came out and told David that he was a father of a little boy. I said, “What are you naming him?”

David said, “Debbie says his name is William, but I’m calling him Scooter.” Then he said, “Come on.” He started walking back into the delivery room, still holding my hand. I said, “David, I’m not sure you want me back there right now. I’m sure Debbie’s tired.” He didn’t let go.

We walked in, and there was Scooter — not yet wrapped up in a blanket. I had never seen a newborn. I’d seen babies, but I’d never seen one when he first shows up. I’ve got to tell you, it’s not our best moment. I looked at that child. He had a pointed head, and he had not even had a bath yet. I wanted to say something encouraging, but the child looked real bad. Debbie said, “Isn’t he beautiful?” I’m so grateful I realized it wasn’t a question.

“He’s a looker,” I said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“He’s just beautiful,” she said. “He does look just like his daddy.”

David held that bundle that was half baby and half blanket. He said, “Welcome to the world, little man. You are home now; welcome to the world.”

I remember being moved because we knew nothing about Scooter — except that he didn’t look that great at the moment. We didn’t know who he would become ... and that matters, but it doesn’t matter ultimately. The only thing that ultimately matters is that he belonged to them.

That’s what grace looks like. You get invited not because you

are good or can reciprocate, but because you are loved; you belong. Grace means you belong.

Sometimes, for various reasons, I assume we don’t want to go in to this dinner. We don’t want to follow Jesus all the time. We come up with our excuses, but this I trust: When we have run our excuses as far as they will take us, and realize that for which we ultimately hunger, the kingdom of God will still be there, and the invitation will still be offered. And we will discover there is no other place we would rather be.

¹Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (1990), p. 179

²Culpepper, *The Gospel According to Luke*, New Interpreter’s Bible (1995), p. 291

³Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (1997), p. 550

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.