

## The Lord's Supper: The Lord's Supper and the Touch of Grace

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Luke 15:15-24

This parable is not an obvious place with which to begin a meditation on the Lord's Supper. The parable, after all, is about a banquet. In the Mediterranean world, a banquet was a multi-media event. This banquet is not a Chamber-of-Commerce-type affair, held in a drafty hall at the Convention Center, at which you pay a month's salary for a piece of foam rubber masquerading as chicken placed alongside three or four warmed-over green peas. This is a real celebration: polished silver, linen tablecloth, smoked salmon, candlelight.

We call what we are about to have "the Lord's supper." But we are really having a crust of bread and a sip of lukewarm grape juice. In fact, if you are really thirsty, there is probably just enough grape juice to make you thirstier. How does this qualify as a banquet?

Furthermore, the text does not explicitly mention the Lord's supper.

Yet when we read this parable in the full context of Luke and Acts, we discover that it evokes the Lord's supper in two ways. First, scholars today agree that whenever Luke describes a meal, he is bringing to consciousness the many-faceted understanding of meals in Judaism and early Christianity.

The Jewish people of Luke's day believed that every meal was a religious occasion. Eating breakfast was like going to church. To invite another person to eat with you was to say, "I accept you. I

want you to be a part of this earthly life, so here is some of my food.” That is the point of Jesus’ eating and drinking with sinners. And many Jewish people believed that on the last day, when God’s love would be known from shore to shore, God would put on a great banquet (e.g. Isaiah 25:6–8). To many early Christians, the Lord’s supper was a preview or appetizer of this great banquet.

Second is the reference to bread. The parable is introduced by a statement from an unnamed guest, “Blessed is the one who shall eat bread in the sovereign domain of God!” After the giving of the manna in the wilderness, bread became a symbol of God’s constant presence for Jewish people. When they ate bread, they were reminded of the constant presence of God. Luke uses the symbol of bread as a way of speaking of this divine presence known to the disciples through the presence of the resurrected Jesus in the Lord’s supper.

On the road to Emmaus the travelers became aware of the risen Jesus with them when “he was known to them in the breaking of bread.” The phrase “breaking of bread” is the way Luke speaks of the Lord’s supper repeatedly in the book of Acts.

Why give such a banquet? Partly, I suppose, to celebrate. Then, as now, food was a sign of celebration. When you get a promotion, you burst in the door and say to your spouse or friend, “Come on! We’re going out to dinner!”

And more, sometimes we need something physical to say, “Hey, this is really happening. This is not a dream.” You have heard someone say, “Pinch me so I will know I’m awake!” The food can be such a touch, such a reminder.

The peculiar thing about this banquet is the guest list. We

preachers have a tendency to fixate on the three who made excuses and did not come. I suspect that our fixation reveals more about us than it does about the parable. The parable focuses not so much on who did not come as on who did come. Did you get the list of those who showed up? The poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame. We should not be surprised at this list because the Jewish tradition emphasizes God's love for the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame. Jewish law contains important provisions to insure that these on the edges of society are fed and clothed and housed.

“And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you have commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and the hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled’.”

The highways and the hedges are outside the city. In the Bible, the city is often a symbol of Judaism, a symbol of security and community. But outside the city — on the highways and hedges — things are rough. Remember what happened to the “certain man” who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho? “He fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him and, departed, leaving him half-dead” (Luke 10:30). That is the way it is on the highways and hedges!

And who is out there among the highways and hedges? Who is outside the community? Gentiles. Gentiles are sometimes described as being on the highways — perhaps because they are restless and unsettled. And they are described as being among the hedges — perhaps because they have something to hide. Of course, the invitation to the gentiles to come to the banquet is completely consistent with Jewish belief. The great prophet Isaiah,

for instance, looked for the day when the gentiles would come to God and would eat the great banquet of the last day. “The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (Isaiah 25:8).

Yet the invitation to the gentiles is still surprising. Not because it is unexpected but because I am a gentile. And I know, in my heart of hearts, that I do not deserve to come.

What about you? Should you have a place at God’s banquet? Do you deserve an invitation to the table of God’s love?

Have you ever known another member of your church whom you just could not stand? And you wished they would go to church somewhere else? Have you ever made a decision — not because you thought it was right but because you hoped it would get you in good with a powerful member of the congregation? Have you ever been mad at someone and talked about it with everyone in town except the person with whom you are angry?

Have you ever been jealous of the accomplishments of a friend? Have you ever coveted another person’s intellectual ability, or skills in human relationships? Have you ever lusted after another person? Have you ever given your half-best to something or someone who deserved your absolute best?

Unless you are an angel in human form, you have done something which should keep you away from God’s table.

Yet here it is. “Compel them to come.” “To compel” means to offer the strongest and most persuasive invitation, but one which is not coercive. It sounds too good to be true that the God of pure, unbounded love is a God who accepts us and is with us and invites us to this table. Sometimes we need a little touch, a little reminder, that we are indeed welcome.

Swimming lesson time. The child says, “I won’t go! Ill drown and

you'll be sorry." Then she gets into the water and blows bubbles, goes all the way under and learns to glide.

The day comes when the four-foot-tall child will jump for the first time into the five-foot-deep water. The six-foot instructor looks up at her from the water and says, "Remember, 111 be right beside you all the way."

The child jumps in and begins assorted body movements. Each arm and leg is operating independently. The child's head is aimed straight for the wall. She starts to sink. The instructor puts a hand under the stomach of the child and gives the child a little lift, and suddenly the child is swimming. And the next morning at 5:15, the child is bouncing on the bed. "Is the pool open yet?"

The Lord's Supper is like that: it's a lift, a touch in the water.

Jon Walton, a Presbyterian minister from Delaware, reports that after open heart surgery he was given a muscle paralyzer. "I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't do anything. But people came to my bedside and spoke to me and I heard most of it. I heard the nurse saying, 'Oh, he can't hear a thing. He's in a deep sleep.' I heard a doctor friend come in and tell me ... he was there and he wanted me to know it."

The Lord's Supper is like that. With the bread and the cup, God lets us know of His constant presence.

A crust of bread. A sip of Welch's. The touch of God's love for you and me. A banquet? No, it's more than a banquet.