

Excuses Excused

To the saints who are at **St Peter Zion** Lutheran Church and are faithful in Christ Jesus; Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is from the Gospel according to St Luke, chapter 14 – ‘When one of those who reclined at table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” But He said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many.... And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’”’ This is our text.

In the Name of Jesus, Who didn’t make excuses but died for you that you might taste of His banquet

Our text for today is part of a longer story in chapter 14. Jesus was invited to the house of a Pharisee. After He healed a man with dropsy and give a lesson on meal etiquette, one of the other guests was so impressed by Jesus’ allusion to the happiness for those included in the resurrection of the righteous, he blurted out, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Isn’t this a wonderful statement? Absolutely, and it is true. There will be great joy in Paradise; all believers will be blessed. Notice, however, how St Luke switches gears. “But Jesus said to him.” “But.” Even though the man’s statement is not incorrect, is there something wrong with it? Then, comes the answer with the parable for today.

Who did the man count as “everyone”? For example, did he include the man healed of dropsy? As far as the Pharisees and other religious leaders were concerned, everyone included all those descended from Abraham, well almost, the sons of Ishmael were excluded. Also not included were anyone not descended from Abraham. So, you and I are left out. They also would have excluded the blind, lame, etc. – one’s with dropsy. But! I’ll come back to this.

How does Jesus address that? A man gives a banquet and invites the well-to-do and his influential neighbors. Now, we must understand, a man may plan a banquet. He’d select a date several weeks in the future. Nowadays, we may send ‘save-the-date’ notices for such a big event. The master would have sent messengers abroad with a formal invitation. Then on the day of the banquet or even a day or two before, depending on how far a person had to travel, the master would dispatch the servants once again with a reminder – today’s the day. When Dad and my brothers and I were out working in the garage or barn, Mom would call from the house, “Dinner’s on the table.” We knew what time dinner was, but in our busyness, we might forget, so she’d call to remind us. Her call was this second notice sent by the master. But that’s when the trouble began.

Each man has an excuse. And each excuse in a slap in the face of the master of the banquet. They’ve known for weeks that this day was coming. Okay, they didn’t have a desk diary to mark important dates in. They didn’t have a smart watch or Outlook calendar program. They didn’t even have such a thing as a paper calendar. But they had the sun and moon “for signs and for seasons, and for days and years.”

The first man had to go look at some land he had purchased. Now, wait a minute! When was the last time you bought a field, a house, a car, and didn't check it out first? When we were stationed in Los Angeles, we got a new commander, a 3-star general. He traveled there to find a place to live and found a wonderful house. He made an offer, but with a contingency clause in it. As he returned to his hotel that evening, he started thinking about the price of this house. He, a 3-star general, decided he couldn't afford it. He called his wife and told her, "No matter how much you like the place, tell them 'It doesn't suit me.'" That was the contingency clause, his wife had to approve. Perhaps similarly, the land merchant had sent his foreman to handle the preliminary work. But in a way, he is now saying, "I don't really trust my foreman."

The second man had a similar excuse. He had to go and check out five-pair of oxen he had purchased. Same question, why didn't he check them out beforehand? The third man had just gotten married. None of the excuses make any sense. They were insults. Were these three men thinking that just because they were well-to-do or influential, they could skip this banquet, but they'd be invited to another? To put this in the religious terms of the man who started all this, did they think because they were sons of Abraham they would be welcomed into the kingdom without question, no matter how many times they slapped God in the face? They would be blessed because of their name, not because of their faith?

We have excuses as well and they are equally lame. "Sunday is the only day I can sleep in." "We've got family coming for a party and we need to get things ready." "I've heard it all before; there's nothing new, so I'm just going to skip church." Perhaps, it was COVID and fear of infection. I know, I'm speaking to the choir. You're here and enjoying the banquet our Lord has provided. You are truly blessed. You don't have any of these lame excuses. Or do you?

What does God's word say about worship? What do we confess regarding worship? In the Third Commandment we confess from Holy Scripture, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." You're here, right? You're remembering the Sabbath Day, that is the day of rest God has provided in order that you may relax in His presence and be refreshed spiritually by His word. You're doing what God has commanded. But are you? Where is your mind? What are you thinking about? Are you daydreaming? Dozing off?

Remembering isn't about keeping a set of facts and figures in your mind for an upcoming history test. Remembering for the Hebrew meant to make the story, the event, their personal story. They were to remember walking through the Red Sea on dry ground, but most of them had not physically done that, neither have you. You remember and make it your story because it was a foreshadowing of God's ultimate delivery of you at Golgotha and the empty tomb, and Jesus ascending from the Mount of Olives. Remembering is involving yourself in the event. As if you were there. Remembering the Sabbath Day is

making God's day of rest, your day of rest that you may commune with Him and, I'll say it again, be strengthened spiritually onto eternal life. Does that mean you must not do any work? Not at all, but begin with time for God and with His gifts for you.

The people at the banquet with Jesus had missed the point. The wise diner was so impressed with Jesus' teaching and sign that he made his great comment, but he missed the point. He was in fact already eating with God! This great blessing, joy, is ours already now. And we don't wait for Judgment Day. We recline at the banquet table again today. And Jesus is here. In fact, as we commune with Jesus, we also commune with all our sainted family and friends who are now at their Sabbath rest in Paradise.

Let me return to the 'but' I said I'd come back to. Actually, I've been beating around the bush already. The Pharisees and other religious leaders Jesus dined with were of the false opinion that they had a free pass to heaven because they were directly descended from Abraham. More than that, everybody else, while they may not be excluded, certainly had to earn their pass. They had to physically become Jews.

St Paul writes in the alternate epistle reading for today, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility." Don't remember just as a fact, but make them part of your story; make the event your event. We were far off because we had made God our enemy. We hated God. But Christ has made peace with God by His blood. In Holy Baptism, you were adopted into God's family. You didn't become Jewish, but you are a son or daughter of God. Again, Paul writes, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." And later, "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." Don't misunderstand the word 'son,' to imply daughters are left out. God's inheritance is for all – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That's Gospel news, my friends, and we know it is true. "For God loved the world in this way, He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."

We are among the blessed reclining at table and eating the bread of heaven! The master in the parable sent his slave out into the highways and hedges to compel people to come in and fill his house. We might struggle with the word compel for God does not force anyone to believe in Him; He invites. But this is a case of urgently inviting the poor living in the slums of society. Or the people in the world of then and of today disbelieving that they have been invited to the White House for a grand banquet. That just doesn't happen. But this master wants to assure these same people that he truly wants them to recline at table with him. Obviously, God is the master of the story. He wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth – Christ Jesus is the truth.

I titled my meditation – Excuses Excused. The citizens of the parable had excuses, but the master of the house refused to excuse them. In the end, he told his servant, none of those men, who had been invited, would eat at his table. Those who reject God’s invitation to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved, are lost by their own hard-heartedness. But Jesus died for your excuses. He has not excused you from the banquet table; He has not excused you from His gifts. He has done more. He died for you. He forgives your excuses, your sins. David sings in the psalm assigned for today, “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. ... The LORD redeems the life of His servants; none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.” Join the Lord at His banquet table where He teaches you of His blessings and satisfies the desires of every believer with His true body and blood onto eternal life. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.