

The Banquet II

Luke 14:1-24

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I've read that in the generation born after World War II—the last thirty years or so—the suicide rate in America has nearly tripled. That's astounding!

I think back to thirty-some years ago. In 1967 the national bestseller was I'm OK, You're OK . . . Transactional Analysis Therapy. Everyone was reading it. It was the subject of youth group retreats. We talked about it in church.

For ten years or so everyone was saying, "I'm OK, you're OK." We handed out warm fuzzies and wrote affirmation notes . . . sang happy songs and went on trust walks . . . sat in front of mirrors with Stuart Smalley types saying, "I'm smart enough, I'm good enough, and doggone it people like me!" During that time we became what sociologists call a Therapeutic Culture.

We would pay people by the hour to speak well of us.

"You're OK."

"You deserve a break today, so get up and get away."

"You owe it to yourself. Take the best seat in the house."

During that time, we *did* take the best seat in the house . . . in the world. Never has the world seen a standard of living so high; a generation so wealthy, so well-fed, so thoroughly entertained . . . spoken of so highly . . . therapeutically positively affirmed.

Yet in my generation we kill ourselves at three times the rate of the generation before.

That's *so strange*. It's almost like what Jesus said in Luke: "Blessed [Happy] are you poor, for yours *is* (not *will be*) the kingdom of God. Happy are you hungry; you that weep and are hated on my account. But woe [how sad], you that are rich and full now. Laugh now. How sad when all men speak well of you."

Every now and then people say things like, "Why would we send so much money to places like the Dominican Republic and Mozambique when there are so many needs right here?" That's right — There are incredible needs right here. And if I take Jesus seriously, our needs are obvious:

All men speak well of us,
We laugh louder than the rest of the world,
We are extremely full,
We are amazingly rich,

And we are extremely sad and depressed,
Killing ourselves at an astounding rate.

Almost as if we've gained the world and forfeited our souls . . .

Almost as if we've exalted ourselves and are humbled . . .

Almost as if in the last forty years we've become self-actualized. But the self we've actualized is poison. The self we've actualized is wretched (dead in trespasses and sins), and the more we say, "I'm OK, you're OK," the more we lie. The more we lie, the more we live in denial and anxiety and fear and despair, and then the more we hate ourselves and try to get rid of ourselves. But the *self* cannot get rid of the *self*!

Suicide is not humbling the self. It is exalting the self.

Bill Maher said on Politically Incorrect, "Suicide is our way of saying to God, 'You can't fire me. I quit.'"

"You can't take my life! I'll take it first!"

"You can't kill me! I'll do it first, exalted to the supreme place of power."

He's right.

Rose Dewitt Bukater was a beautiful, young socialite about to marry into a fortune. She occupied only the best seats in the best rooms on the top decks of the Titanic. Her story really begins when she leaves a lavish banquet, runs to the back of the ship, and prepares to kill herself.

But it's at that point she meets Jack (from steerage). He's "humble and lowly in heart . . . a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." But he's *happy . . . blessed*.

In Luke 14 Jesus goes to a banquet at a Pharisee's house on the Sabbath. Verse 7 . . .

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus tells them how to party. And Jesus *knows*.

To party well, humble yourself. *Don't* exalt yourself; take the place of *least* honor, not the seat of *greatest* honor.

Have you ever been to a party where everyone is exalting themselves, conscious of themselves, concerned about their dignity and honor, and easily offended? It's *Hell*. I think it's literally a taste of Hell.

Jesus says, "Do you want to see a real party? It's not in first class. It's in low class (steerage).

I won't show you a movie clip every week, but I couldn't resist this one. Because Jack Dawson saves Rose, he's invited into her life. So he dines at the Pharisee's table on the Titanic. It's all posturing and posing . . .

[Movie Clip: They've invited Jack to the banquet to size him up, judge him, and cut him down to size. He excuses himself but hands Rose a note (word): "Make it count. Meet me at the clock." They meet at the clock on the stairs between the upper and lower decks, and Jack asks, "You wanta see a real party?" He takes her to party below deck. There's laughter, singing, and dancing. Jack dances with a little girl, and Rose talks with servants.]

At the clock there is a time change—a "kairos" change—a party change. There was a party on the top deck and a party below deck. Who were those people below deck?

They were the poor, the hungry,
those acquainted with grief;
They were ones spoken poorly of,
the "last and least" on the Titanic,
and they looked *happy*.

Now obviously there are unhappy rich and unhappy poor. The key must be who is trying to exalt themselves and who is trying to humble themselves.

You know that we go to parties we don't like, with self-important, snobby people, because we think it will improve our standing at work or church or wherever. But if we really want to have *fun*, we party with idiots: people that aren't occupied with themselves—stuck on themselves; people that can say "I'm a jerk, you're a jerk, and I love you just the same."

When I party I want people who *know* I'm spiritually poor, emotionally maimed, and mentally lame . . . not that they think it's OK but that they love me anyway, for they live in grace and sing songs like this:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me . . . *and you*.

Amen! And when I see them the same way, we can forget ourselves and enjoy the party, which is the energy of people in love. God is love, and people lost in God become a party. This world can only offer a cheap imitation of that.

Jesus goes on with the party instructions:

“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid.

“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed [happy], because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

The Pharisees were not happy. They were so full of themselves they were miserable. So Jesus offers this therapy: “Don’t throw parties to exalt yourself; throw parties to humble yourself. Instead of throwing parties for yourself, throw parties for others.”

When you throw parties for yourself (and we all do, in all kinds of little ways), you just get more of that selfish, sinful self . . . stuck in yourself . . . lonely . . . a universe of One Exalted Self surrounded by people you have humiliated into non-existence . . . not people you love but things you own . . . commodities like a field, a yoke of oxen, or a concubine (not a bride).

But throw parties for others, and you lose yourself in them. You’re happy because they can’t repay you. They’re not commodities in *your* world, but you get lost in *their* world. You want therapy? Here’s therapy: “Throw parties for people who can’t repay you.”

You can do that in little ways:
with a compliment or a smile, or
by letting someone take your seat.

We can do it as a program:
in the Dominican Republic or Mozambique, or
at the Adam’s Mark Hotel on Christmas Eve, or
here.

We’ve had this vision for four years of hanging a sign by the road:

EXIT 254
FREE CHEESEBURGERS
AND ONE FREE BEER!

(One beer because it’s safer than wine like Jesus made.)

I don't know if we can do the beer thing here on I-70. There have been various concerns expressed. Whatever the case, we can let the world know: We haven't come to police your morality; we've come to invite you to a banquet!

Over the last four years I've heard us talk about that vision, and we've said stuff like this:

1. What a cool church we'd be if we did that!
2. What a great form of outreach! (We need to bring people in to pay for this building.)
3. What a way to change people's lives and get them saved! (Change the community.)

In other words:

"We'll throw parties and feel good about ourselves . . . get tithing units and stars in our crown and better neighborhoods."

"We'll throw a party and be repaid with happiness."

But Jesus said, "You'll be blessed [happy] because they *cannot* repay you."

A bejeweled English socialite stepped out of a high class hotel in London where she had been dining and dancing at a charity banquet for street children. She was about to get into her Rolls Royce when a homeless child walked up and whined, "Spare me a sixpence, ma'am. I haven't eaten for two days." The woman recoiled. "You ungrateful wretch! Don't you realize I've been dancing for you all night!?"

She danced *for* the wretch but not *with* the wretch.

She danced *for* the child but really *on* the child, so she could feel better about herself . . . happy with herself, but she really wasn't happy. She was as miserable as a Pharisee.

I think there is another group besides the "me generation" and the "upper class" that is very susceptible to depression and suicide: the "perfectionist/do-gooders" . . .

Like Pharisees who work so hard to look good,
Like people in the helping professions,
Like religious people,
Like pastors,
Like me . . .

. . . those who look like they serve a banquet of grace but subtly do it to be repaid . . .

. . . those who preach on humility in order to be exalted . . .

. . . those who serve in order to convince themselves that their self is OK . . .

. . . those who throw banquets in order to be self-actualized.

But Jesus says, “You’ll be happy because they can’t repay you.” Then He says, “You’ll be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” A more direct translation of the Greek is not “at the resurrection of the just,” but “in, by or with the resurrection of the just.”

Who are the resurrected just?

Well, the Pharisees just don’t get it. They can’t stop thinking about themselves . . . exalting themselves . . . finagling for the very best seat. One of them in his discomfort says, “Well, blessed [happy] is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.” At that Jesus tells him the parable of the Great Banquet, what we preached on last week:

God is throwing a Great Banquet, and He sends His Servant (lowly and humble in heart) to call the guests. But those invited make excuses. One examines his field, one tests his oxen, one says he’s married a bride. They’re all occupied with themselves and their world . . . blind to the Great Banquet that is being served.

So the Master sends His Servant to the outcasts: the poor, blind, maimed, and lame; and then to the foreigners, prostitutes, and thieves. And they *come*.

- You must admit you’re poor, blind, maimed, and lame.
- You must admit you’re a foreigner to the banquet with the heart of a prostitute or thief.
- You must admit, “*I’m* not OK, and *we’re* not OK; we’re dead in our own trespasses and sins.”
- You must die to your pride—your self—in order to taste this banquet.

The Servant compels us to do so with grace. He allows us to crucify Him but loves us just the same. There we see we are not OK . . . but He gives us His body broken and His blood shed to pay for our sins. Jesus *is* the Banquet of Grace, and we could never repay God for the depths of His love. He throws parties for people who kill Him (every time we sin)!

So our self—our ego—dies, and God gives us everything, including Himself.

I’m always amazed that the point of suicide is so near and yet so far from the point of that grace. For in truth, we all want to die . . . to die to ourselves . . . to die to the self-centered, arrogant, lonely selves we are. But the difference between suicide and redemption is the difference between trusting ourselves with our death or trusting Christ with our death.

I have a friend who said to me, “I hate myself, and I want to die.” I said, “Tell Jesus. Ask Jesus to crucify that old self.” As we prayed she saw the old self she hated nailed to the cross in agony. Then, all at once, she saw herself that hated her old self *also* nailed to that cross. Then Jesus nailed Himself there with her. She watched her whole self die in wretchedness. But no sooner had she died than she saw herself alive and dressed in a white, wedding gown.

Paul writes, “I’ve been crucified with Christ.” Do you think that was good news for Paul, who persecuted the church, dragging parents off to their deaths while little children cried? “I’ve been crucified with Christ, and it’s no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”

“If we’ve been joined with Him in a death like His, we will surely be joined with Him in a resurrection like His.”

Admit you’re dead; humble yourself; and the host of the Great Banquet exalts you . . . washes you in His blood and makes you His Bride.

Does a bride have a good seat at her wedding banquet?

Yes! And she’s not just OK; she’s *awesome!*

Jesus makes us His Bride, and He fills us with His life. That’s salvation and sanctification. If Jesus has saved you, He’s also teaching you how to live, how to party. And because God has thrown such a banquet for us, we can throw such a banquet for others.

We can love, “because He first loved us.”

We can forget ourselves, because our selves are lost in Him.

We can serve the banquet, because we’ve received the banquet.

Once saved, that’s our therapy. That is how we “work out our salvation” and “walk in newness of life—joy.” This is how we can forget our old selves that were crucified.

Throw banquets for people who cannot repay.

Philip Yancey writes that according to the Boston Globe, a bride was jilted by her groom just before her wedding day. She went to the downtown Hyatt Hotel to cancel the banquet and get her \$6500 back. But she found it could not be fully refunded.

It was then she had a crazy idea. Why not pay the remainder and go ahead with the party? She had been homeless once but was now well-off. She had received grace; now she could give it.

And so it was that in June 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it has never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken— “in honor of the groom,” she said—and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters.

That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served *hors d’oeuvres* to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers.

Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.

Jesus says, “Throw banquets like that.”

In fact, Heaven *is* a banquet like that.

In fact, maybe Heaven *is* that (at least a bit).

Jesus said, “Whatever you do to the last and least of these, my brethren, you do it to me. I was hungry, and you fed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison, and you came and visited me. I was poor, blind, lame, below deck, and you danced with me.”

Just think of it! This bride in Boston, jilted by some earthly groom, in a very real way, may have ended up dancing with the King of Glory, hidden in bag ladies, vagrants, and drug addicts.

And I bet she was happy.

Jesus said you’ll be blessed [happy] because they can’t repay you. You’ll be repaid with the resurrection of the just. Heaven *is* the resurrection of the just: the body of Christ. That is:

street urchins,
 vagrants,
 prostitutes,
 thieves;
the poor,
 blind,
 lame . . .
 redeemed by the blood.

The New Jerusalem is people.

Heaven is people.

“Heaven is at hand”—among you, said Jesus. Eternity is now . . . if only you could forget yourself long enough to see who you’re dancing with.

At the end, like the world, the Titanic sinks. Jack Dawson drowns so Rose could live. Later she says, “He saved me in every possible way a person can be saved.” Rose takes on a new identity when they get to land. She dies to her old life and takes Jack’s name: Dawson.

Her old finance Cal saves his own life, taking an exalted lifeboat seat. But he later kills himself in despair, when his money fails.

James Cameron wrote the screen play . . . but he stole the story. The story is Jesus’.

Eighty years later Rose dies, and this is how it ends:

[Movie Clip: The camera zooms in on pictures of Rose as a young woman. The pictures are on her nightstand. From the pictures the camera moves to Rose’s face and then as if through her face into the depths of the sea and into the wreck of the Titanic. It’s now a picture of what Rose sees.

[As she moves through the Titanic it begins to come to life. She enters through doors at the base of the stairs. She's greeted by a crowd of people, including servants and Jack's old friends, and the little girl Jack danced with. She walks up the stairs (rather than down) and meets Jack, who is waiting for her once again at the clock. She's wearing a white dress that looks like a wedding gown. She kisses Jack. The people applaud.]

"I make all things new," says Jesus. There's a new Jerusalem . . . and a new Titanic. Rose goes to the place where eternity touched time: the clock. The one who saved her is waiting for her. And everyone she partied with below (the servants, the help, the poor) receives her with joy.

Jesus said, "Use your money to make friends, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations."

So this is our vision; what I have preached for four years; what we'll try on May 5:

- We'll put a sign across the bus out on the road:
FREE CHEESEBURGERS
FREE DRINKS
EXIT 254
- We'll get some bands playing Waylon Jennings and Conway Twitty for the trucker crowd.
- Maybe we'll get a Ferris wheel and a dunk tank.
- We'll serve a banquet in this Banquet Hall, praying that a couple of lonely truckers might stop . . . and some poor people . . . and some girls who just got abortions and feel like Hell . . . and some lonely business men who have been up all night staring at a bottle of Scotch and a gun . . . We'll serve them — just serve them.
- And when they ask, "What is this? Some kind of evangelism program?" we'll say, "Not really."
"Is this some kind of publicity stunt?"
"I hope not."
"Is this some way you score points with God?"
"No — already got them."
"Well, why are you doing this?"

This is what I want to say: "Well, you see, I'm pretty well-off compared to most. I'm full, and really just about everyone speaks highly of me. And sometimes I really struggle with depression. This is my therapy. May I get you another cheeseburger?"

On May 5 we'll take a shot at serving a cheeseburger banquet. But every weekend and every minute we're to serve the Great Banquet. And this is the Banquet: that on the night our Lord was betrayed, the only begotten, exalted Son of God—lowly, and in the form of a slave—humbled to the point of death on a cross . . . on that night at that banquet He took bread, broke it, and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way after supper He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me. I’m not going to drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Yet He said the kingdom is at hand. There will be no doubt in the future.)

Come to His table and believe the grace and love of our Lord God in Jesus Christ our Savior.

“Lord Jesus, we thank you that being the Creator in all your glory you humbled yourself. Jesus, we have believed a lie, that life is in exalting ourselves. And you have shown us that life is in humbling ourselves and giving ourselves away.

“Thank you that you humbled yourself and came to this world and died for us on that cross on the highway outside Jerusalem in order to become small to enter into our small, lonely, little, blind, selfish world, so we could taste your banquet and dance with you forevermore as the Great Bride.

“Lord God, we say this stuff, but you know we don’t really believe it with everything we have . . . because the world could not contain our joy if we did.

“So thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are here with us. I pray now that you would send your Spirit. Lord, your Spirit is the great therapist—the counselor—and you do not come simply saying, ‘You’re OK,’ you come and convict us of our sins. You break our hearts but then give us your own life and say, ‘Look at yourself. You are *awesome* because I’ve made you awesome.’

“So, Holy Spirit, draw us to your table. May we lose ourselves in you and find ourselves in your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

May you throw some parties this week for people who cannot repay you. And it might hurt. But the author of Hebrews said He did it for the joy that was set before Him. That joy was *you*, His Bride. That’s what *I* believe.

So may you throw parties for people who cannot repay you. That may mean:

Send a gift and don’t let them know who sent it;
Buy a homeless man some pizza and tell no one;
Adopt a child (they’re not going to repay you);
Perhaps best of all, forgive someone who really hurt
you. Don’t make them pay.

Whatever the case, give a party for people who can’t repay you, and you’ll be blessed.

Further Reading

The will of the world is always a will to death, a will to suicide.

-Jacques Ellul

I believe Dr. Kevorkian is onto something. I think he's great. Because suicide is our way of saying to God, "You can't fire me. I quit."

-Bill Maher

If a man [is] in despair . . . and if by himself and by himself only he would abolish the despair, then by all the labor he expends he is only laboring himself deeper into a deeper despair. . . . On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. . . . This precisely is the reason why he despairs—not to say despaired—because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing. This is the potentiated *formula* for despair, the rising of the fever in the sickness of the self. . . . This is the situation in despair. And however thoroughly it eludes the attention of the despairer, and however the despairer may succeed in losing himself entirely, and losing himself in such a way that it is not noticed in the least—eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his situation was despair, and it will so nail him to himself that the torment nevertheless remains that he cannot get rid of himself, and it becomes manifest that he was deluded in thinking that he succeeded. . . . Despair is Sin.

-Soren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

-Matthew 16:24-25

Last night I went to a party. Everyone admired my wit and sophistication. All agreed that I was most entertaining. And I returned to my apartment, closed the door, held a gun in my hands and thought about blowing out my brains.

-Soren Kierkegaard

I saw my whole life as if I'd already lived it . . . an endless parade of parties and cotillions, yacht and polo matches . . . always the same narrow people, the same mindless chatter. I felt like I was standing at a great precipice, with no one to pull me back, no one who cared . . . or even noticed.

-Rose DeWitt Bukater, The Titanic

"For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

-Luke 14:11-14

Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement admitted to the folly of her soup kitchen: "What a delightful thing it is," she said, "to be boldly profligate, to ignore the price of coffee and go on serving the long line of destituted men who come to us, good coffee and the finest of bread."

-Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?

The man who makes faces to amuse a baby gives up his dignity; so does the man who roars with laughter. The essential condition for having fun is to forget your dignity, that is, to forget yourself. We recognize this truth, for example, when we say, "I was beside myself with laughter." We have to get outside ourselves to enjoy ourselves. Otherwise, we won't have any perspective; we won't see the joke.

-William Kilpatrick, Psychological Seduction

Generous people are very rarely mentally ill.

-Karl Meninger

"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations."

-Luke 16:9

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

-Luke 6:20b

Be excellent to each other. Party on, dudes.

-Bill & Ted

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