

The Storyteller / Week 1

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’” (Luke 14:16-21 NIV).

Imagine everyone around you got a special treat except you. How would it make you feel? If you were the only person in a room full of people who got a special treat, how would that make you feel? Has there ever been a time that you felt left out? If so, how did it feel? It’s the worst, right? Anytime we get left out of something, we can’t help but immediately start thinking about what we did to not get invited. What are we lacking? What’s wrong with us that we’re not worth an invitation? And why does it make us feel so bad?

I bring this up because I think some of us may feel that way here at church. If you don’t, some of your friends may feel that way. Uninvited and unwanted. It wouldn’t surprise me if you told me that you knew people who felt this way. Why? Because this idea isn’t new. The fear of church is something that religious leaders have been imposing on culture over the last 2,000 years, and it’s still making the rounds today.

Back in Jesus’ time on Earth, the religious leaders were the ones who got the candy. They were the ones who were on the inside and got the invites. Because they were viewed to understand God better than others, they were considered superior to everyone else. To most people in that day and age, it seemed as though God loved them more. If God threw a party, they would be on the A-list, and regular people wouldn’t make the cut.

Basically, they lived with the idea that **you must be impressive to be invited**. There was a certain type of person you had to be. You had to have a certain type of reputation and lifestyle. People were convinced that only the people who behaved perfectly were welcomed in the presence of God. After all, God’s guest list only extended to the people who were truly deserving of an invitation! So that’s what they taught—that God was only for the holy, noble, good, and worthy. And this meant that *a lot* of people were left out!

Like we said last week, **we all tend to believe that some groups of people belong in the church, and others don’t**. This idea has been around for a long time.

Maybe you have felt like *you* don’t belong. Maybe you’re reading this thinking that if anyone knew what you’ve been up to, we’d wonder why you’re here. Or if a churchy person, knew what you’ve been thinking, doing, believing, or doubting, you would be told that you don’t belong.

If you’ve ever felt that way, you’re not alone. And there’s nothing wrong with you! When I was a teenager, I felt that a lot! I felt like I had to . . .

- Behave to belong.
- Believe to belong.
- Be good to belong.

Here’s what you need to know: Jesus isn’t where that belief comes from. In fact, Jesus made very clear how He felt about this idea. And He did that by telling a story. Last week started talking about how Jesus was the great Storyteller, and He told stories or parables to give people insight into what

God is all about. And often, the stories took what people already believed and made them think differently.

So today, we're going to look at a story that He told about who belongs and fits in. And because people had a habit of thinking one way about it, their minds were *blown* when Jesus interrupted their beliefs and introduced a different way of thinking!

The passage begins with Jesus hanging out with some people at a dinner. People were talking, laughing, sharing buffalo wings (I mean, maybe?), and telling stories. Jesus told a story about inviting people to a dinner party, and a guy jumped in and basically said, "*What a blessing it will be to attend a feast in the Kingdom of God!*"

We don't know this for sure, but chances are good that he said this because he assumed that he knew what that type of party would be like:

- The best of the best would be there.
- The people who were a big deal.
- Based on the way the religious leaders saw God, He would *only* invite the most impressive people.

In other words, this guy probably assumed he was invited. He was really feeling himself. But that's not what Jesus had in mind—which is why the great Storyteller immediately began another parable . . .

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests." Jesus began. "At the time of the banquet he sent his servants to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready'" (Luke 14:16-17, NIV).

This is exactly how parables would typically begin. Like a normal story. Everything is going as you might think it would. A party was planned, and now it's time for the guests. But this parable, like all parables, had a twist.

"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me'" (Luke 14:18, NIV).

The story goes on to give excuses from two other people as to why they wouldn't be at the party.

If you're the host of the party, and you hear that everyone you invited has more important things to do, it wouldn't go over very well. And that's how the host of this party felt according to Jesus' story. He's angry and aggravated: all this work, and no one is going to show. So, what does he do?

"Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame'" (Luke 14:21b, NIV), the host said.

To the people listening to the story, this was a *major* twist. The host didn't reschedule? He didn't send his servant to the first round of invitees in hopes of changing their minds? Nope.

The host basically said, "If they're not interested in coming, I'm not interested in having them. Go out and find the people who *want* to be here."

And that's what the servant did. In this culture, being poor or sick or disabled often meant being a social outsider, and that's exactly who got an invite. **He invited all the people no one would expect to be there.** And when he was done? The servant said there's still room for more. So, the

host sent him *back* out and told the servant to bring in ANYONE who wanted to attend. Why? He wanted a full house! He wanted people to be there who *wanted* to be there! That's the ONLY qualification!

Can you imagine what the people at Jesus' table thought when He told this story? *So, it's NOT a best-dressed party for the impressive in the kingdom of God? It's NOT exclusively for the best of the best?*

Nope. Everybody was invited. **The only requirement for getting in was showing up.**

And the people who did show up were blown away! Why? **Because no one had ever considered them to be the kind of people to be invited to a party. But in God's kingdom they are exactly the right kind of people.** Not because they had a lot of money, not because they were well behaved, not because of their popularity, connections, choices, religious beliefs, or right choices, *but because they wanted to be there.*

Can you imagine if you were in their position? Think about how they felt. Grateful. Honored. Special. Important. Humbled. Worthy.

These were exactly people who weren't used to feeling accepted with no conditions, but in this story, Jesus was saying, "That's what the kingdom of God is like!"

Now, what was Jesus trying to convey with this story? What's the point?

AT GOD'S PARTY, THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM FOR MORE.

- Everyone is invited.
- Everyone can belong.
- You don't have to be impressive to be invited.
- You don't have to believe to belong.
- You don't have to behave to belong.
- You don't have to be good to belong.
- God's invitation includes everybody.
- There is always room for more.

This means that *you* are invited. And so is the person you never expected. You can say "yes" to the invitation. And you can invite literally anybody else.

I hope that changes how you think about church and how you think about the kind of people you thought belonged in church—what they look like, act like, and think like, because the most surprising thing about this parable is the best part about it: *everyone is invited.*

If you're not in the party, today I'd like to give you your invitation. No matter who you are or what you've done, you're invited. You belong here.

For those of you who are already at the party, I want to challenge you to extend the invitation to others—to people you may have written off and discounted. They are invited as well, and you could be the one to do the inviting. What is your favorite memory or activity from this summer so far?

Remember, everyone is invited!

This week, **I want you to make a list of five people you know who need to hear this message—that God has extended an invitation for them to belong.** Then, you can invite them to join our virtual youth group, join you at church, and/or just go through this lesson with you. How can you help them know that they are invited and wanted?

But if nothing else, after this lesson, I want you to start seeing *everyone* as being invited to the party that God is throwing. Every. Single. person. And next time you start to think that someone doesn't belong, or that *you* don't belong, I want you to remember this story Jesus told and message behind it: There is always room for more.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where are some places/events you would invite a friend? Why?
2. Think about a time you were excluded from something. How did that make you feel?
3. Read Luke 14:16-21. How does this passage show us what God's Kingdom is like when it comes to inviting and including others?
4. What are some ways to make people feel like they belong here? What are some things that can make people feel uncomfortable?
5. What can make inviting or including others difficult, awkward, or intimidating?
6. What could make it difficult for someone you know to feel like they belong? Is belonging intimidating? Are there expectations?
7. If you were to invite someone, what would you want their experience to be like?
8. Who is someone you can invite this week? What is one thing you can do to make sure they feel welcome this week?