Word & World
Volume 40, Number 1
Winter 2020

The Great Banquet (Luke 14) and the Church's Great Hunger

Mandy Brobst-Renaud

The church today faces a failure of imagination. Having heard stories of abundant feasts, abundant life, and a God who loves the world in embarrassing excess, congregations nevertheless struggle to imagine new possibilities. In the face of dwindling church attendance, competing commitments, racism, sexism, and the desire for more people and more money, the church often responds with self-protective measures to save itself. Inviting new members or guests to our congregations often has the implicit goal of benefiting the church. Congregations struggle to welcome those who are inconvenient guests, to sit side by side with those whose politics differ from our own, and to give the seats of honor to the poor and disenfranchised.

This vision of the church stands at odds with the vision of the church presented in Luke 14:15–23. As the banquet thrower in Luke 14 discovers, the attendees of the Great Banquet are rarely what one can anticipate or expect. Rather, the attendees are those who heed the invitation to fill the banquet hall. The parable reveals that the church has failed to extend the invitation as widely as we ought. The parable of the Great Banquet also reminds the church that it is an invitee to the party and not the host. This parable calls the church to confession. The confession, in turn, inspires new futures, in which the church is called to respond

The parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14 is a model for the revitalization of the church. Given by the gracious and generous God of all, this banquet invites all into its hall. The sometimes chaotic energy of this feast is a means of revitalization for contemporary Christian communities of faith.

with an excess of imagination that mirrors the excess of the ultimate banquet thrower—God.

The parable of the Great Banquet also reminds the church that it is an invitee to the party and not the host.

The Parable of the Great Banquet: Vision for the Church

Jesus tells the parable of the Great Banquet in response to the statement "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15). The beginning of the parable brings an important reminder to the church: the church is not the host, but rather, an invitee. Some commentators, including François Bovon, also connect this parable to the Lord's Supper: "Our communion services and our eucharistic celebrations are an anticipation and a representation of the banquet of the kingdom in a way that is awkward yet at the same time adequate. How could we fail to link this parable to the Lord's Supper? Do not the mention of bread, the context of the kingdom, and the expression 'for it is already ready,' encourage us to do so?"[1] This parable's reverberations in communion practice call into question the church's attitudes toward communion and toward the feast.

The banquet thrower in Luke 14:15–23 invites his guests and prepares for the banquet. Everything proceeds according to plan: the man issues the initial invitation to his guests, who (we presume) respond by accepting the invitation. After the initial invitation, the host would likely make a second invitation, which is where the host's plans take an unexpected turn. The second invitation, "is simply like ringing the dinner bell; no rejections are expected. But something goes very wrong for the host in the story Jesus tells."[2] This refusal to attend would be unexpected by both the host and the audience. Instead of receiving honor from his guests, the host would be shamed by the guests' last-minute refusal to attend the banquet.

The excuses offered to the host are unlikely to assuage his shame. All three of the refusals are paltry last-minute excuses for not coming. None of the reasons for the attendees' absence are short-notice emergencies, nor are they situations of exigency that would demand immediate attention. A person would not purchase a field or a team of oxen before trying them out, nor would they do so with little advance notice. Similarly, it is unlikely that someone would get married with such little notice (and one might presume that the host would be aware of the marriage and would have been counted among the guests). John Carroll envisions a small town, in which the invitation leads to gossip about the banquet thrower:

[1] François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 379. See also Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 322.

[2] Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke,* Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 227.

> The usual advance invitation to the occasion has, as one might expect in such a close village culture, apparently permitted exchange of gossip about the meal, the invited guest roster, and the host. Otherwise the circumstance of 100-percent declined invitations is wholly improbable. The parable proceeds to narrate a conspiracy of last-hour refusals to attend, therefore intentionally dishonoring the meal host.[3]

The would-be guests' excuses heap shame upon the host. The banquet hall, now filled with the makings of a party, has no guests. The host's response to the empty banquet hall is as unexpected as the initial guests' refusal to attend.

Everything proceeds according to plan: the man issues the initial invitation to his guests, who (we presume) respond by accepting the invitation. After the initial invitation, the host would likely make a second invitation, which is where the host's plans take an unexpected turn.

The host, in an unexpected and striking move, invites people to dinner who would not ordinarily receive such an invitation: "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14:21). The new invitees could not repay the host (Luke 14:14), nor could they bring honor to him, as his initial invitees could. At the turning point in the narrative, the host responds decisively to his situation by bringing in those who did not "fit" at his banquet in any traditional sense. The host widens the boundaries of his generosity further: he sends his slave outside the boundaries of the town and invites the ostracized and the outcast. The imagery of these lowly individuals hobbling their way into the banquet hall would have likely shocked the initial invitees, who perhaps stopped surveying their fields and halted their oxen to gape at the parade of people filling the banquet hall. Those who may not have received such an invitation realized this feast was *for them*.

The Great Banquet and the Great Confession: Are All Welcome?

The parable of the Great Banquet exposes the church's tendency to invite and welcome a particular demographic of people. Though congregations may desire the vision of the feast, political, economic, and racial divisions prove more tempting. Luke 14:15–23 inspires our confession: the church often desires to fill the banquet hall with people from whom the church expects to benefit and people who are easy to welcome. The parable of the Great Banquet reveals the church's tendency to welcome those who already know the "rules" of engagement and whose welcome extends only to those already present.

[3] John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary,* New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 303.

This parable also reveals the church's tendency to see those from the highways and byways as charitable causes but not feasting companions. Historically, the church has welcomed the disenfranchised and displaced to food pantries, soup kitchens, overnight shelters, and other programs designed for them. Many worshipping communities, however, find it difficult to welcome those who are not familiar with the customs and idiosyncrasies of worship life into their congregations. Congregations frequently welcome those who are easy to welcome, whose social and cultural backdrops seem familiar, and who know the "rules" for worship without much effort on the part of the church. By contrast, in Luke 14:15–23, the host's dinner companions have little in common with him. The guests' lives are less secure; they live on the margins; they have no expectations or feelings of entitlement to the feast. It is unlikely that the individuals who filled the hall knew the rules of elite engagement, and even if they did, the host would not have expected the guests to follow such rules. Rather, the rules of engagement change as the feast changes. The host does not welcome them because they will benefit him, nor does the host seem to see them as a cause for charity. What might have once been a dinner party that proceeded along expected lines now becomes a bit more unwieldy, a bit wilder, and perhaps a bit more fun.

The host does not welcome them because they will benefit him, nor does the host seem to see them as a cause for charity. What might have once been a dinner party that proceeded along expected lines now becomes a bit more unwieldy, a bit wilder, and perhaps a bit more fun.

The vision of the Great Banquet is one in which myriad groups have a seat at the table. Jesus illustrates this vision in his dining practices throughout Luke and dines with Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners, and myriad groups of people who "followed him."[4] Despite this vision, the church often fails to extend welcome to outsiders and those who are different from the expected attendees. This tendency is evidenced by the relative racial homogeneity in many congregations.[5] While some traditions, such as the ELCA, have made efforts to extend the church's welcome more widely, the statistics suggest that the ELCA has widened its borders in ideology but not in practice.[6] The extension of the boundaries to the highways and byways in the parable inspires the church's confession that our boundaries often extend to the church doors (or maybe the parking lot). The parable calls congregations and the wider church not only to widen the boundaries in ideology, but to create structures through which the church may widen its boundaries in practice.

[4] Jesus dines with Pharisees (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1), tax collectors, and sinners (Luke 5:30; 15:2; 19:7).

[5] The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, is 96% white/Caucasian and 89% third-generation or later American citizens: https://tinyurl.com/t6ufwzc.

[6] See https://tinyurl.com/swg6pnc.

Though individual worshipping communities have made strides in extending their ministries beyond the walls of the church, there remains a tendency to welcome people who come seeking the church community rather than extending our borders outward. Congregations struggle to do what the banquet thrower's slave has done and to go out from the perceived security of the building into the highways and byways. Welcome to others, when extended, often entails welcome to those who seem familiar. In the parable, when the host's peers refuse his invitation, he invites those who have little in common with him. Then, when there is *still* room, the host extends the physical boundaries of his generosity. He sends his slave to the highways and byways to welcome in those who are socially removed even from the disenfranchised townspeople. The willy-nilly invitations of the host bring all manner of people, and congregations would do well to imitate this shocking welcome.

The vision of homogenous dining companions is at odds with the vision of the Great Banquet. The parable of the Great Banquet inspires us to imagine the church as the place of hospitality and radical welcome. It exposes our tendency to welcome those who agree and to sideline those who disagree. Congregations are reticent to love recklessly, especially when we fear that this reckless love will end in disagreement. Mary Hinkle Shore suggests that worship has the capacity to resist these divisions:

> Each week, just by worshipping together, we are resisting the temptation to believe that if we just voted [those with differing opinions] off the island, we would offer a better witness to the Gospel. By loving each other—even on the days we need the scripted words and actions of the liturgy to do so—we expose the biggest lie of our culture: that if only some of us were gone, our way of life would be secure again.[7]

Our lives—like the life of the banquet thrower—are not more secure when the voices all sound the same. It is not our political agreements or our social ideologies that make us secure; rather, it is Jesus's promise to draw near and be with us. This statement need not imply that difference is easy. It is not, but this difficulty does not absolve the church of our failures to welcome those we find inconvenient. The vision of the Great Banquet reminds the church that our relationships are built on our shared invitation to the feast—an invitation that we have been invited to extend.

The church has not extended its table like the banquet thrower. The banquet thrower inspires the church to extend a genuine invitation without the expectation of anything in return. This invitation is one to spend all of the grace, joy, and hope the church has been given. Like the irresponsible gardener in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4–15), the invitation extends regardless of the perceived quality of the reception. Like the banquet thrower, the invitation goes to those who

[7] Mary Hinkle Shore, "Preaching the Beatitudes in the Age of Trump," *Journal for Preachers* 42, no. 2 (Lent 2019): 3–4.

have little in common with the host, and it extends beyond the borders of the church and beyond the borders of time and space, encapsulating within it the feast of all creation.

The Great Confession: The Church's Great Hunger

The parable of the Great Banquet inspires the church's confession that it is hungry for the vision of the feast. This confession inspires a related confession: the church has confused itself with the host of the feast. The church, however, is not the host, but an invitee. The extravagant welcome of the banquet thrower reminds the church both of its great hunger and of its desire to be invited.

The church is hungry for the vision of the Great Banquet, though congregations often struggle to share the vision of the banquet. In many cases, congregations focus instead on increasing membership as if more members or attendees will fulfill the church's hunger for the feast. Even congregations with robust membership and healthy endowments find themselves hungry for the feast. The parable of the Great Banquet reminds the church that it is an invitee. We would do well to recognize the surprise that this banquet is *for us*, but it is for the church and congregations to *share*, not to possess.

The church is hungry for the vision of the Great Banquet, though congregations often struggle to share the vision of the banquet. In many cases, congregations focus instead on increasing membership as if more members or attendees will fulfill the church's hunger for the feast.

Congregations sometimes confuse themselves with the host of the banquet, but the banquet is not something the church does. The church, rather, is like the slave who extends the invitation to the highways and byways, extending the borders to all that God has created. The echoes of the feast of all creation ought to reverberate in the church's feasting. This feast is more than a meager meal; it is full of the extravagance of God, who is less concerned that the attendees know all the rules of engagement and far more concerned with filling the banquet hall.

By admitting that it is not the host of the banquet, the church can simultaneously admit its own hunger. This confession requires the decentering of the church. As guests, congregations (and the church as a whole) are not at liberty to determine the guest list. The guest list has already been determined. If the host has determined to invite all manner of guests—the disenfranchised, the socially outcast, and those who might be inconvenient or difficult to love—then the church would do well to recognize that it is not just to *serve* individuals from these groups but, rather, to see them as *tablemates*. The church is called to recognize its own hunger and the hunger of the world around it. Like the apocryphal quote attributed to Martin Luther, the church is a collection of "mere beggars showing other

beggars where to find bread." All are welcome not because of the church's welcome but because of God's.

The Church's Hunger, Imagination, and New Futures

The point of the church's confession is not only to name the church's failings or things the church could do better. Rather, the confession admits that a new future is possible. It does so by inviting new imagination for the future of the church, and in that imagination, the new future is made possible. The confession tells the truth about the church: it is hungry for the feast and yearns for a full banquet hall along with the host.

The banquet thrower in Luke 14, like some congregations, experiences disappointment that his initial invitation did not yield the intended results. In response, the host reimagines his dinner companions and invites the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. The banquet thrower envisions a future that seems unthinkable—an elite dinner party filled with the socially outcast. As Bovon indicates, "In line with God's love, exclusivity gives way to inclusivity."[8] The church's confession inspires the recognition of the banquet thrower's extravagant invitation, and the widening of its boundaries because it is not the possessor of the feast but its recipient. By extending the invitation, the church extends its boundaries because the boundaries of God's love extend—and have always extended—to the farthest reaches of creation.

At a time when many discuss the death of the church, the banquet thrower reminds us that there is already a feast prepared. This invitation ought to inspire our courage to tell the truth about the world as it is: it is more often divided than unified and invites only the expected. It is a world that sees an empty building and assumes failure, and it is a world that sees death and assumes there is no life beyond. The future into which the banquet thrower invites us is a future of satisfied bellies and souls, and a banquet hall that is full not because of what the church has done but, rather, because of what God is doing. God is throwing a feast, and the church—and everyone else—is invited.

The Great Banquet and Its Guests

The goal of the parable of the Great Banquet is those who attend. Without the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, and without those from the highways and byways, the parable would envision an empty banquet hall filled with food but bereft of attendees and joy. The absurdity of the parable is an invitation to remember the absurdity of the feast. It is a feast where those who excuse themselves react with astonishment at the guests of honor, and where these guests are the object of the banquet thrower's delight.

[8] Bovon, *Luke 2*, 372.

The parable of the Great Banquet echoes the vision of the feast of all creation, and the invitation to reflect that feast in our churches. The parable, however, also exposes the church's proclivity to invite those from whom it might benefit and, at the same time, to provide programming outside of regularly scheduled worship for the marginalized and disenfranchised. The church often fails to widen its boundaries to the highways and byways. The parable of the Great Banquet inspires our confession, and our confession inspires imagination for new ways forward. Where discussions of death abound, God responds with abundant life and an extravagant feast. So, too, is the church invited to respond to fears and failures with imagination of futures that are—as yet—unseen.

The Great Banquet is not a conventional feast; it is a feast full of people who do not know the rules, who fill the banquet hall with their cacophonous joy at the surprise of the invitation. Likewise, the church is an inconvenient banquet with a rowdy bunch of attendees, many of whom do not get along, and most of whom are more concerned with where they will sit than with whether there is a seat for their neighbor. Yet the feast is prepared, and the banquet thrower issues the invitation to imagine a different future. In this future, all are welcome because the banquet thrower has declared it to be so. The Great Banquet brings with it the invitation and the promise to satisfy the great hunger of its guests. Welcome to the feast. ⊕

MANDY BROBST-RENAUD is Assistant Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana. Her primary research interests include ancient rhetoric and the Lukan parables, which she explores in both her dissertation and her recently published article "Soliloquy in Chariton and Luke," Perspectives in Religious Studies *46, no. 30 (2019).*