

It's Palm Sunday everyone! And yet today we will not be looking at the traditional Palm Sunday story. Instead, we will continue our Lenten series Meeting Jesus at the Table, based on the book by Cynthia Campbell.

In this series we've been discussing the dining experiences of Jesus during his ministry here on earth. Today we will look at the story of an invitation to a feast that became a flood of excuses for not being able to attend.

Who has made up a story so they could skip work? How about making up an excuse to get out of going to a party? Guilty. How about a reason for not going to church? Let's look at some excuses people have used to skip church.

- The pastor doesn't respond to my remote control
- Three Letters: N-F-L
- I don't have kids yet.
- I have kids
- I prefer to use cheez-its for communion.
- If I want to feel guilty, I'll just call my mom.
- I was on my way to church and was almost there when I looked at my cell phone. It said "No service" So I turned around and went home.

Today Jesus tells a story about a dinner banquet and excuses those invited gave for not attending. Here are the excuses they gave. One person bought land and wanted to see it. Another bought new oxen and wanted to try them out. And another begs off for marital reasons. (It's fun to blame our spouse for something like this isn't it?)

Some could say these are legitimate excuses. Excuses steeped in economic and social obligations. Others say they're weak excuses used simply to get out of attending the banquet. Legitimate or illegitimate one thing is clear. The host of this banquet is ANGRY! His generosity treated so flippantly. How embarrassing is this. What can he do to save face? He can find substitutes to fill these now empty spaces.

The audience for this story is a group of Pharisees who, no coincidence, gathered at a dinner party. And they were the social elite of this party. So they seemed to understand this story. They understood what this host would feel. They knew the etiquette of party invites and RSVPs. The presumed guest list and who should be invited to such a banquet. They even got the frustration of the host with these flimsy excuses that lead to empty chairs and empty tables.

But, as usual, Jesus doesn't stop there. He takes it further. Imagine the confusion of the Pharisees when the host in Jesus's story turns to his slave and tells him to invite people who are poor, crippled, blind and lame. Forget about social order. Forget about replacing these people of status with other people of status. Forget all of that. Just fill up this table.

The guest list is one that was mentioned by Jesus only a few verses earlier in the parable about seating choices. This same group of Pharisees would have heard that parable. What was Jesus point with both the parable and this story?

Tables and chairs are not to be filled by the who's who of this world. They are to be filled with the who's who of the kingdom of God. A point that should leave the Pharisees and us today pondering the question. What excuse would we make to avoid a seat at a banquet full of people who are poor, crippled, blind, and lame? People who would never have a reason to expect to be invited to such a banquet.

When we've experienced downturns in life. It's easy to lose hope during these times. Martin Rinkart certainly had reason to lose hope. He was a humble Lutheran parish priest who served in Germany during Europe's Thirty Year's War. So named because this war lasted from 1618 – 1648. The conflict broke out between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire. War wasn't the only thing devastating Germany at this time. There was famine, disease, and worst of all, the Black Plague.

During this time, Rinkart found himself performing funerals for 40 to 50 people...a day. He buried over 4000 souls. Among these souls, were Martin's wife and children. No one would

blame Rinkart for looking at all of this tragedy, all the empty tables and chairs and throw in the towel. Give up, lose faith, lose hope. This would be a reasonable response.

But Rinkart didn't do that. Instead, he wrote a song. Something to sing at the table before each meal. A song to help him stay focused on whatever blessings he still had. Today we can find this song on page 102 of our hymnal. If you know it, sing it with me.

Now thank we all our God,  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom this world rejoices.

Who from our mother's arms  
has blessed us on our way.  
With countless gifts of love  
and still is ours today.

Martin could have allowed himself to sink into the despair of the empty chairs at his home, in his church, and in his community. But by singing this song day by day, meal by meal, he found he was able to persevere through this practice of gratitude. As it saved Martin, this song still lifts up the hearts of many today.

Our story today invites us to question how we would respond in the case of empty chairs and tables. Empty because of flippant excuses, severed relationships, and death. How do we let our grief, sadness, anger, and mourning transform us. How do we let these disappointments reshape us. How do we avoid allowing ourselves to settle for a simple band-aid that will soothe our wounded pride and broken hearts? What if we decided to let that empty table push us towards something more. Something Expansive. Something unexpected?

That's what Jesus' story is all about, another demonstration of the realm of God. Of the great banquet of eternity which, btw you all have an invitation to. Today's story is just another version of the many stories throughout the Bible of God's lavish generosity, bounty, and extravagance. Weddings and banquets, dedications, and offerings. All leading up to the most generous and extravagant thing God will do.

God sends Jesus, the ultimate example of goodness and mercy. On this earth Jesus walks the land, teaches on hillsides, sits at tables, and breaks bread. All to show the breadth of God's extravagant love and welcome. Even in the face of excuses, sadness, disappointment, frustration, and yes, even anger.

Extravagance is offered even though tables are not yet full and chairs are empty. This extravagant love, it never quits. Instead it continues to expand and grow. Pushing outward, drawing in those from the fringes and finding a place at the table. It is this love that goes into the roads and lanes, hillsides and seashores. Those invited are shown a seat and become part of that great banquet that has no end, where there will always be enough. Through Christ we all have a seat.

Today's passage invites us to close our eyes for a moment and imagine both Christ's table and our seat at it. But let me warn you. It won't be social elites sitting next to you. You will find yourself seated next to people who are mourning and grieving. People who have suffered unspeakable loss. Those who've been abandoned by their dearest loves. Those who are angry at justice that's left undone. Those who feel pushed to the fringes by unfair social orders. In the realm of God, these are the invited guests. Would you be willing to accept such an invitation?

Let us be those invitees who will not hesitate. Who will not search for excuses. Let us pray for the strength of Martin Rinkart who resisted the urge to give up in the face of his own sadness, grief, anger, and longing. As God's beloved, may we open our hearts to all God's people. To lift them up and welcome them home.

Today Jesus asks us to yield to his transforming love and extravagant generosity. We serve a God who will always make room, always prepare a seat, and always have enough bread to break for all.

No more excuses...let us accept the invitation to a seat Christ's table. It's ours for the taking. Let us pray.