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 Luke 14:12b-24  
 Hudson  
 9-9-07

SCRIPTURE: *(Jesus said) “when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

*One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said to the slave, Go into the roads and the lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”*

SERMON: Did you know that God’s right here? Right now? If you move too quickly, if you don’t look . . . you’re probably going to miss it. You can go through the whole of life and miss it all.

Last week SueAnn came into my office and said, “Look outside; it’s a beautiful day.” And she said that she and Dee were going to lunch (apparently we do that a lot) -- going to sit outside and take in the day. I said there was no way I could do that. That I had way too much going on. Trying to be helpful, she asked what I had on my plate. So I ran through a litany of the stuff to be done by the end of the day. And then I said, on top of that I’ve got to get some work done on the sermon. “What’s the sermon about?” she asked. Without thinking about it, I said: *Not forgetting to enjoy God’s gifts in the now.* She got a good laugh out of that. She caught the irony of it right away . . . I didn’t.

The image shared in our lesson this morning would have made a lot of sense to its first hearers. When a wedding took place in a village everything shut down and everybody came to join in the gift of the celebration. It was a moment not to be missed. In those days people didn’t have meat on a daily basis. The only way to get meat was to slaughter an animal – something only done on special occasions. And without refrigeration, once the meat was prepared, it had to be eaten or it would go bad. You either had no meat. Or you had a feast.

So when it was time for the party, everything needed to be dropped or you missed it.

Jesus' story says that everyone was invited to the party. All that mattered is that you recognized the gift and accepted the invitation.

It's said that C. S. Lewis once walked into a heated debate among theologians arguing over what made the Christian faith unique among the world's religions. None of them could agree until Lewis said it's easy. "It's grace." Christianity is the only faith that embraces the idea that God's love is totally, completely, unconditionally free. It's not earned. It's just given. The grace of God is so easily missed. That's what this morning's gospel lesson tells us. God invites them all freely. Everyone's invited. Some accept. Some don't. It's an invitation freely given.

Back in 1990 the Boston Globe ran a story just like our lesson this morning. The story in the Globe was about a wedding feast being prepared by a bride and groom. They planned for the reception party at the Hyatt in downtown Boston. They spared no expense in the planning. This was going to be a once in a lifetime moment and they wanted it to be just right. It wouldn't be cheap . . . but they both said it would be worth it. They wrote a check for half the cost of the reception as they left the hotel to go prepare the invitations.

But the day the invitations were supposed to be sent, the groom got cold feet and said, *I'm just not sure. It's a big commitment. Let's think about it a little longer.* When the angry bride went to try to cancel the reception at the Hyatt, the events manager said she was so terribly sorry. Even confessed that the same thing had happened to her. But there wouldn't be a refund. The contract was binding. She could either forfeit the money she'd put down or go ahead with the party as planned.

It seemed a little weird, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party – not the wedding she'd planned, but a huge blowout. Ten years earlier, the Globe reported, she'd been living in a homeless shelter. She'd gotten back on her feet. Got a good job. Put away some money. Now she had the crazy idea of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

So in June of 1990, the downtown Boston Hyatt hosted a party unlike any they'd had before. The jilted bride changed the menu to boneless chicken – "in honor of the groom," she said. She sent invitations to rescue missions and shelters. And so it was that on that night, people who were used to eating scraps of pizza from dumpsters dined on chicken cordon bleu. Tuxedoed waiters served hors d'oeuvres, champagne and chocolate cake to bag ladies, vagrants and addicts as they danced late into the night. (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 45, 48-49)

Imagine a gift like that . . . totally free. A gift like that is sadly easily missed. Like all the people in the parable who turned down the invitation . . . and then it's gone.

It goes against our better instincts to even imagine that such a gift could be freely given. Is anything ever really free? Without strings attached or other motives? The lottery isn't free

money. Fifty cents on the dollar is kept by the state. Same is true with casinos. When Oprah gives away cars to everyone in the audience, we say it's not just generosity . . . it's a marketing gimmick.

But the gospel says that life really is gift. That's the definition of grace. All God wants is for us to enjoy it. To not waste it. To appreciate the gift and offer thanks.

One of my favorite books as a boy was a book by the name of Dove. Maybe you remember it. It's the travelogue of Lee Graham's solo trip around the world in a tiny twenty-four foot sailboat named Dove. He was the youngest person to circumnavigate the world. He was sixteen at the time. Graham's father wanted his son to make the trip. His mother didn't. So his father sent his mother a letter trying to convince her that it was the right choice, in which he wrote my favorite line in the book. He wrote, *It seems our son Lee is more interested in living than longevity*. More interested in living than longevity. He wants to take it all in and live it.

I wonder how much of life slips by me without my ever noticing it. Over the last few years I've ridden a bike up and down the tow-path countless times. On Labor Day I did what I rarely do . . . I walked it. And I saw things I'd never seen when I flew by on a bike. A bog teaming with life. A blue heron hidden in the underbrush.

Have you noticed that God's right here, right now blessing us this very moment? Last week at an evening retreat we were broken into pairs and asked to share a few "high moments" of life in the church with each other. I was paired with Charlie McGlumphy. If you don't know Charlie . . . he's typically the man in the orange vest in the parking lot. Charlie told me his high moment is "the center aisle." I said what? How can an aisle be a high moment? And then he went on to tell me how this aisle is the one he walked down with Christine when they got married – it's sacred. Then he told me how all four of his children came down this aisle when they were baptized – it's sacred. (He was getting a little choked up at this point) And then he said this is where the offering is brought forward and communion comes down this aisle. For Charlie . . . if you want to see God, just look in the aisle. And I have to tell you . . . I never thought much about this aisle until I talked to Charlie. It was just a way in and out of church. Now, I will never see it the same again. Now I know it's sacred ground. I just had failed to look. Failed to take notice. Failed to accept that invitation because I was always so busy coming and going.

God's right here . . . right now. Have you looked around to see who's next to you? Take a look. The moment won't last. Enjoy the gift right now. Don't miss the invitation to embrace the gift of this moment. That's why we have celebration Sunday. It's a reminder that the moment is right now. This instant is nothing less than a gift. Accept the invitation to embrace it now.