

The Kingdom of God is a Party

Passage: Luke 5:27-39 | From the series: Luke

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When I was in college, a friend and I attended a wedding and had a great time. We celebrated with the bride and groom and reunited with old friends from high school. It was a great party. My friend and I talked about it for years.

There was only one problem: We weren't invited.

At that point in my life, I didn't know that you weren't supposed to attend such affairs without an invitation. When I had heard that an acquaintance was getting married and that some friends were going, I called up my friend and suggested we attend.

"Don't you need an invitation?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I answered.

I can't remember how I found out where the wedding would be, but we managed to find our way to the church and to the backyard reception. We were the original wedding crashers. My friend and I decided that we enjoyed weddings so much that we joked, even after learning of our transgression, that perhaps we should make a habit of crashing them.

In Luke 5:27-39, Jesus attends a party and then evokes images of a party. Indeed, the kingdom of God is like a party. Who's invited? And if you manage to secure an invitation, what do you do when you get there?

So far, Jesus has called three fishermen, common laborers, to be disciples. Perhaps now that he's made a name for himself, he can aim a little higher.

An invitation

Luke 5:27-28:

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

In choosing Levi, a tax collector, Jesus couldn't aim much lower.

When Jesus addresses him, Levi is sitting in his booth collecting taxes on goods as people enter the territory of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee at the behest of Rome. Jewish tax collectors such as

Levi were doubly despised, first because they gouged their countrymen and second because they collaborated with the enemy. Tax collectors symbolized foreign domination.

The last thing a Jew in good standing would say to a tax collector, however, is the first thing Jesus says to Levi: "Follow me." Even in our day, who says to the IRS, "Follow me"?

By including Levi in his inner circle, Jesus risks bringing discredit to himself as a herald of the kingdom of God, the arrival of which was expected to exclude any Jews who collaborated with the enemies of God's people. A popular preacher of the kingdom who aligns himself with a tax collector will inevitably incite those who believe that the coming of the kingdom means the overthrow of both enemies and their collaborators. By summoning a tax collector, Jesus places both his mission and his life at risk."¹

Levi, like the three fishermen, leaves everything to follow Jesus. Levi was working for Herod, who fancied himself as king of the Jews but was actually a lapdog of the Romans; now Levi is following Jesus, the true king of the Jews who would become Lord of the world.

¹Levi bears the name of Israel's priestly tribe. In the days of the prophet Malachi, however, the priests had turned away from the Lord. Nevertheless, the prophet anticipated the day of the Messiah, who would bring with him the kingdom of God: "He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 2:7-9, 3:3). In effect, when Levi gets up to follow Jesus, he is raised to new life, signaling the arrival of the kingdom of God, notwithstanding the expectations of Jewish nationalists.

Join the party

If the kingdom of God is like a party, who's invited? If Jesus is willing to bring discredit to himself and place his mission at risk to call the Levis of the world, then no one is too far from God to receive an invitation. Everyone is invited! You're invited! If for whatever reason you feel like an outsider, Jesus wants to include you. Join the party.

Moreover, if Jesus is calling the Levis of our world, then he's calling us, as his followers, to open our arms to them. We may have to adjust to accommodate them. We may have to open ourselves to different ways of thinking about church. We may have to learn to relate to people who are vastly different from us.

Levi is so excited about Jesus that he throws a party for him.

A great feast

Luke 5:29:

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

Jesus' calling of a tax collector is compounded by his sharing a meal with a crowd that includes not only tax collectors but also "others" whom the Pharisees call "sinners," Jews who flagrantly disobeyed the Mosaic Law. In that day and place, sharing a meal meant sharing life. You didn't recline at table with everyone; you reclined at table with those you trusted and accepted.

Above all, if you heralded the coming of the kingdom of God, you didn't recline at table with tax collectors and "sinners." To do so meant you were aligning yourself with the wrong people. If you reclined at table with tax collectors and sinners, many people in Israel would assume that you were opposed to the kingdom of God.

For the third time in Luke's narrative, Jesus enters a house. In each of the previous stories, Jesus healed someone: Simon's mother-in-law and a paralyzed man. This story features a kind of healing as well. Jesus will compare himself to a physician, in fact.

Tax collectors and "sinners" are outcasts from the synagogue, the place of worship. They can't go to the synagogue and probably wouldn't want to, anyway. Jesus, however, goes to them. He enters Levi's house and dines with his people. He steps into Levi's world.

When Jesus healed a leper, an outcast, he restored him to community. When Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, he heals them: he restores them to community. There can be no doubt that Jesus includes these people in his community because his disciples, who formed his inner circle, are also present for the meal. He doesn't seem concerned that his disciples will be sullied by association with such a disreputable lot. Jesus brings together "sinners" and disciples at the same table.

Jesus parties with us

Jesus stepped out of heaven and into our world. He meets us in the tax booths of our lives, so to speak. He parties with us and our friends.

By doing so, he challenges us to step into the worlds of others, particularly those who don't know him. Most "Levis" aren't going to darken the doors of a church. They don't think church is worth their time. Moreover, visiting a church seems like traveling to a foreign country to many of them.

Therefore, we must be willing to attend their gatherings and party with their friends. We might be surprised by how much fun it is—by how much fun they are.

In Jesus' day, not everyone is in a partying mood.

Grumblers at the feast

Luke 5:30-32:

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

In the previous story, Luke introduced us to scribes, experts in the Jewish law, and Pharisees, an unofficial Jewish pressure group that aimed to purify Israel through intense observance of the law and other traditions in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God. Many Pharisees were fierce nationalists who opposed both Roman rule and Jews who collaborated with it. Luke identifies these scribes as belonging to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees and scribes deem it scandalous for Jesus, as a herald of the kingdom, to eat with tax collectors and "sinners." From their perspective, he's partying with the wrong people. The sense of the scandal can be explained by one of our expressions: it's like he's sleeping with the enemy.

Jesus, overhearing the Pharisees' question about his dinner partners, responds with a proverb. He is like a physician who doesn't help healthy people but sick people: Jewish "sinners" and tax collectors who care little for the law. He heals such people by calling them: extending God's forgiveness and inviting them to be part of his community.

Jesus does not exclude so-called healthy people, whom he equates with the "righteous," unless they're self-righteous, of course. The righteous are not those who live perfectly but those who belong to God in view of their faith, which manifests itself in behavior that can, in one sense, be defined as righteous. Jesus doesn't need to call people who already belong to God. Therefore, he calls "sinners"—that is, flagrant lawbreakers—and tax collectors and enfolds them into the company of the righteous.

Why does Jesus place his mission and his life at risk by choosing a tax collector and dining with him and his people? Because his mission involves the incorporation of such people into the people of God.

The prophet Isaiah likened the advent of the kingdom of God to a feast that included not only the "sinners" in Israel but the pagans outside Israel also: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples / a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, / of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined" (Isaiah 25:6). Later, Jesus will say, "And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). With a meal at the house of a tax collector, the party is in full swing.

In this story, how does Jesus "call" sinners and tax collectors? He calls them by eating with them. Healing takes place over a meal in a house. Eat together!

The powerful Pharisees are arrayed against Jesus and his dinner partners. Jesus risks everything to share a meal with his new followers. In the end, such behavior will cost him everything.

How is it with Jesus?

Join the party. Is there something holding you back? Could it be that in some deep place, for whatever reason, you feel unwanted?

At the wedding reception that my friend and I crashed, the bride and groom were making the rounds. The groom approached my friend and me, shook our hands, and said with a wry smile, “Thanks for coming.” Only later, when I learned of my faux pas, did the irony of his greeting dawn on me.

Is that how it is with Jesus? No! Of course not! Why? Because he calls. He invites. He wants you. He wants you at the party.

The Pharisees and scribes are not persuaded.

What about fasting?

Luke 5:33:

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.”

Movements that sought to renew Israel featured fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). Disciples of John the Baptist, who preached about the coming kingdom, also fasted. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jews fasted for the sake of humility, mourning, repentance, and petition. They also fasted in connection with the Babylonian exile (Zechariah 7:5).

The Jews had long since returned from Babylon, but as long as they were ruled by foreigners, they considered themselves an exiled people. They fasted in hope that God would restore their fortunes. After all, the prophet Zechariah predicted that God would turn their fasts of mourning into feasts of joy (Zechariah 8:19).

A feast of joy— isn’t that what Jesus’ meal with tax collectors and “sinners” was? Jesus and his disciples shared a meal with tax collectors and “sinners,” who had been far from God but were now drawing near. Jesus brings the exile to an end.

The Pharisees observe that Jesus and his disciples don’t fast like those involved in other renewal movements. Jesus responds with three illustrations that show why fasting is inappropriate for his disciples at this time.

A time for feasting

Luke 5:34-35:

And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."

First, Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to wedding guests. A wedding is a time for feasting, not fasting—for celebration, not mourning. The prophets predicted that the coming of the kingdom of God would be like a wedding in which God, the bridegroom, would marry his people (Isaiah 54:5, 62:4-5, Hosea 2:14-20).

With the presence of Jesus, the kingdom is coming, and the divine-human wedding is imminent. The day that Jews had been fasting for has come. If ever there was a time for joy, this is it.

However, Jesus would be "taken away" from his disciples when he was crucified, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Servant of the Lord: "By oppression and judgment he was taken away" (Isaiah 53:8). Jesus told his disciples, in reference to his impending crucifixion and resurrection, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (John 16:20).

If the disciples fasted immediately after Jesus was taken from them, the New Testament writers do not record them doing so. Luke records minimal fasting by followers of Jesus in the book of Acts (Acts 9:9, 13:1-3, 14:23).

There remains in our day a place for mourning—and for fasting in connection with mourning, repentance, and seeking guidance. Jesus is not opposed to fasting, just fasting at the wrong time and for the wrong reason, such as fasting that fails to recognize the new age (Matthew 6:16-18). He gave instructions on what you should do "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16-18).

The New Testament, however, gives us more incentive to feast than to fast, to rejoice than to mourn.

Let joy get the better of you

I don't crash weddings anymore; instead, I perform them. As a pastor, I get to stand on holy ground with a man and a woman as they commit themselves to each other.

When I first started performing weddings, I wasn't prepared for the emotional impact they would have on me. During one wedding, in fact, I was so overcome with emotion that I forgot to direct the bride to recite her vows to the groom.

From then on, I've forced myself to keep a certain emotional distance during the wedding ceremonies I perform so that I can keep my head about me. Otherwise, I know that joy would get the better of me at times.

When it comes to our marriage to the divine bridegroom, however, we don't have to keep our heads about us. Feel free to let joy get the better of you.

Jesus continues.

Explosive joy

Luke 5:36-39:

He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'"

The final two illustrations concern something old being unable to adapt to something new. A new piece of cloth, when it shrinks, causes an old garment to tear, and new wine causes old wineskins to burst. In each case the new forces some kind of movement to which the old cannot adapt.

For the disciples of Jesus to fast while he is with them would be like sewing a new patch of cloth on an old garment or pouring new wine into old wineskins. It makes no sense to continue mourning the exile and fasting in anticipation of the new age when the exile is ending and the new age is beginning. It's a time for feasting, not fasting.

Jesus brings with him the new age—and explosive joy that obliterates the sad old garments and wineskins. No, you cannot make Jesus' disciples fast while he is still with them.

The prophets not only compared the new age to a wedding, they also said it would feature new garments and new wine (Isaiah 52:1, Joel 2:18-19). The bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is here. He gives us new clothes to wear for the wedding, resonating with the apostle Paul's words: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Jesus pours the new wine of his joy into our ever-expanding hearts, as he himself told his disciples: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). We can therefore say, with the prophet Isaiah, who anticipated the day of Christ:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,*

*as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)*

However, the Pharisees and scribes are among those who refuse the new wine that Jesus offers, so to speak, believing that the old is good. To say the least, they are in no mood to celebrate.

Lock eyes with Jesus

The New Testament encourages us to focus on Jesus and assumes that joy will result.

Jesus told his disciples, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). Seeing Jesus, and seeing the way he sees us, causes a heart to rejoice. Paul even goes so far as to tell us, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). The reason to rejoice, quite simply, is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the bridegroom and we’re the bride, and if we see his beaming face—and Paul tells us that we can—then our faces will beam as well (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6).

When I meet with a couple for premarital counseling, I give them a word of advice for the wedding day. I tell the bride to lock eyes with her groom when she walks down the aisle. Likewise, I tell the groom to lock eyes with his bride when he sees her walking down the aisle. “The rest of the ceremony will take care of itself,” I say. Joy will overtake the day.

Lock eyes with Jesus, and sooner or later you’ll catch is joy. Maybe it could be something like this:

When my daughter Christina was about eighteen months old, I was bouncing her on my knee one afternoon. For some reason, as she was looking into my eyes, she started laughing. Experiencing her laughter caused me to laugh also, which intensified her laughter. We sat there on the couch, locking eyes and sharing a crescendo of laughter for quite some time.

The kingdom of God: a crescendo of laughter? Rejoice in the Lord always—because, well, you can’t help yourself.

I’m haunted by the lyrics to an old Billy Joel song: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints / The sinners are much more fun.” May it never be!

Are you depressed? Bored? Jaded? Doubting? Take a closer look at Jesus.

The joy that comes from knowing Jesus is sure to explode some of your categories. You might find yourself, to your own surprise, rethinking basic presuppositions. You might find yourself expressing faith in new ways. You might find yourself doing and saying things you never thought

you would. You might feel as if you would burst if you didn't do something for Jesus' sake. You might find yourself welcoming and going to the Levis of our world. You might find yourself bringing the joy of Jesus to places of sorrow.

Celebrate Jesus

The kingdom of God is a party. Who's invited? Everyone. You're invited. Join the party. What do you do once you get there? You celebrate! Especially, you celebrate Jesus. You celebrate with everyone else who is celebrating Jesus.

Therefore, I say to you, with fullness of joy: Thanks for coming!