Sunday October 6, 1974

"EXCUSE ME, PLEASE!" Luke 14:7-24

Here we have three parables about dinner parties. And Jesus told these stories while seated at table at a dinner party. We might call them the "table talk of Jesus."

The first parable contains good practical advice. When you are invited to a dinner party or banquet do not automatically assume that you are to be at the head table. If you do, you may be embarrassed because someone more important than you may be invited and you will have to give up your seat. Rather, said Jesus, take the lowest place so that when your host comes in he may say to you, "Friend, go up higher, and then you will be honored. Then Jesus added the punch line--"For every one who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted. We might add--it's better to be surprised than humiliated.

The second parable which Jesus told at this dinner party was directed to the host, to those who give banquets. He said in effect, "When you give a party, do not just invite your friends or your neighbors or those whom you expect to invite you in return and thus you are paid back. Rather, invite also the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind, those who are usually left out, those who cannot repay you, and you will be blessed. The implication here is that we are to be like God, for He invites all to come to his banquet.

Jesus was also saying that the church needs to be inviting all kinds of people into its community. It's all right to invite those with whom we are most comfortable and friendly, but we need also to go much further. To entertain our friends is pleasant and often profitable. To entertain the poor, the down and out, is compassionate. All are invited to God's table and we are all equal in his sight.

The third parable in this scripture lesson contains elements of the first two, for it deals both with the host at the banquet and with the guests who are invited.

A person plans a huge banquet and invites many people. When all is read, the host sends a servant to tell those who are invited. "Come to the dinner, for everything is ready." Then they begin to make excuses. "Excuse me, please, I cannot attend. I have just bought a new piece of property,

and it needs my attention." "Excuse me, please. I have just bought a new boat and I need to try it out." "Please excuse me, I've recently gotten married and there are a lot of things I need to take care of." We know the excuses we make.

This business of making excuses is often humorous. Someone invites us to a dinner or to spend an evening and we immediately think up an excuse. We reply, "Well, I promised myself I'd spend the evening with a new book." or, "My child has a bad cold and I must stay with her," or "I have a previous engagement."

It's funny because both we and the person who invited us often know it's only an excuse. It can be a polite way of saying, "I don't want to come." If we really wanted to go, none of these things would prevent us. For the most part in our lives, we do those things we really want to do.

Now there may be humor in the excuses we offer our friends, but it becomes a serious thing when we do it in our dealings with God. Then it's a matter of life and death.

In this last parable, the excuses may at first sound reasonable in themselves, yet they are not. They are plainly foolish in the light of so gracious an invitation. Thus the story is told with precisely that purpose--to show the folly of our refusals of God's grace. Are these excuses any more foolish than ours? I've heard and still hear some dandies. "I got too much religion as a child, so I'm staying away from church now." The person may mean that she wants to run away from the religion that was given her, or that she may have had too much false religion. But the cure for too much religion or bad religion is not no religion, but a true faith. "I'm so tired when Sunday comes." Answer: Because of the very lack of religion tiredness often comes. Every person gets very tired when he or she tries to live on her own strength.

The Bible tells us -- God gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength. . . Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:29-31)

Many of our excuses are simply put-offs, nonsense! I'm prepared to hear a whole new collection of excuses as we ask for pledges for the 1975 budget.

God continues to set a gracious banquet for us. He invites us to come and have the time of our lives! If we make excuses we may be missing out on the most important thing in creation and there are plenty of others who will be called by God to his banquet in our place.

Today and everyday God is calling you to his banquet, to his table. Instead of making excuses, let's hope we answer in this way--Lord, I have just bought some property, and I want to be a Christian steward of these possessions. I need your help. So of course I'll be there. Lord, I have a business and I want it to be honest and upright in every way, so of course I'll be at your banquet. Lord, I am part of a home and I want it to be a happy rewarding home. I'll need your help and the help of my Christian brothers and sisters, so of course I'm coming to your house.

Today and every day we are being called to God's table. Let's put aside our excuses and be there!