Sunday October 7, 1979

"THE GREAT BANQUET" Luke 14:15-24

In the Bible, the Kingdom of God is often described as being like a magnificent banquet. Jesus told several parables using this analogy. In the parable read earlier from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told about a king who wanted to celebrate the marriage of one of his children and so like many of us he decided to hold a grand feast. He made elaborate preparations for the wedding supper. The king even sent his servants to deliver a personal invitation to the guests. But all of the guests who were first invited made excuses as to why they could not attend. As a result the King said, "If the people whom I especially first invited do not want to come, then I am going to invite to the supper the poor, and the blind and the handicapped and the beggars, and that's exactly what the King did.

Think of it! Jesus Christ describes the Kingdom of God as a gigantic banquet, and you are invited by God himself. You are invited, not commanded. A banquet means satisfaction. A banquet means happiness and joy. A banquet means good will. A banquet means good humor. The kingdom of God is like a gigantic banquet. Is that what your religion is all about? Or do you think of religion as a burden, a duty, something that has to be done or put up with?

Of course, our Christian faith does have within it elements of duty, discipline, sacrifice, but over-all Jesus Christ came into the world to bring us joy. Remember his entrance into the world was accompanied by angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good-will toward all people." The New Testament opens with the note of joy, and ends with all the hosts of heaven singing Hallelujah and with the repeated invitation to come to the banquet.

But notice also in the parable that although the Kingdom of God is compared to a joyful feast with God as the inviter and the host, many who are invited make silly excuses as to why they cannot accept the invitation.

The parable implies that it was a wedding supper to which the guests were invited. A supper is usually held at night and there are no long twilight evenings in Palestine.

It is dark at suppertime always. With this fact in mind, look again at the excuses. The first man said, "I have bought a field and I need to go out and see it." In the dark? Furthermore can you imagine a man buying a field and not having looked at it before he bought it?

The second man said, "I am sorry but I've bought five yoke of oxen and I want to try them out." Again, in the dark? Who plows with oxen at night? Furthermore can you imagine a person buying all those oxen and not trying them out before he bought them?

The excuse of the third man must've brought even more laughter from the people listening to Jesus tell the story. The third man said, "I have married a wife and therefore cannot come." Think of the position of women in that part of the world at that time. Every Hebrew young man thanked God every morning that he was not born a girl, and was trained to do so by his own mother. Women were not much more than property and didn't count for much. Therefore to have a man saying, "I have married a wife and cannot come," sound ridiculous.

The emphasis of the parable is on the banquet to which God invites all of us and the weakness of our excuses for not being able to accept the invitation. God would rather have us be honest and say--"I don't want to come to your banquet because I don't want to get involved in your Kingdom.

But why do we refuse God's invitation with such trifling excuses? Maybe as we noted earlier, we have not found religion in our experience to be anything like a feast--satisfying, joyous and strengthening and bringing an added element into our lives.

Or perhaps in the past we've been let down by someone or group or congregation who professed to be religious and we were disappointed. But the parable says--accept God's invitation. Try again! We don't say, "Beethoven's music is no good just because the neighbor next door murders his sonatas on the piano. Don't judge the Christian faith, the Kingdom of God, by one or more bad experiences.

Or maybe we refuse God's invitation to a deepening religious life because we have no sense of the need of it, at least not now. We have nothing against religion, but have nothing in favor of it either. At some other point in our lives

we'll be willing to accept the invitation, but not now. I cannot fit you in to what I plan to do today. But the parable is saying that if you do not accept the invitation when it is offered, the invitation is withdrawn and given to others. Invitations do not always come according to when we think the time is right.

Some people seem to think I'll try religion later in life, maybe after the second heart attack, or when I've got my business at a prosperous level, or I'll wait until I marry and have children, when I'm more settled down.

But God's invitation to the great banquet comes most often when we are on the rise in life, and where our work, and our struggles and our passions will clash with much that God intends for us, and it's then that we make the silly excuses to avoid God.

Think of it! If it is God who is inviting you into his kingdom, then any excuse, no matter how important it might seem, is ridiculous. Our schedule can be re-arranged. That's why Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and then everything else in your life will fall into its proper place."

The deepest mystery of the world is that God is waiting for us and inviting us. The person who understands this and accepts the invitation is in for the greatest joy in life.

This morning as you come to the Lord's Table with Christians all around the world, let this be the first step toward your accepting the invitation of God to an even greater banquet, to a sense of joy and happiness in your life that can come in no other way. Let your coming to Christ's table also mean that you are going to begin putting aside all excuses and make God a regular part ofyour everyday life. Amen.