

"ON MAKING EXCUSES"

TEXT: "But they all alike began to make excuses"
(Luke 14: 18)

INTRODUCTION Have you ever found yourself "wait-listed" at an airport? You make your way to the boarding gate, ticket in hand, but without a confirmed reservation. The agent informs you that all space has been sold, but he offers to list you as a stand-by. If someone cancels a reservation, or some would-be passenger becomes a "no-show", you have a chance of getting on board.

Grateful for this stand-by status, you sit off to one side waiting and hoping that the gathering crowd will not fill all the seats. "Wait-listed" means just that. All that you can do has been done. It only remains for you to wait for your name to be called. Sometimes it is; sometimes it isn't.

DEVELOPMENT Wait-listing is the subject of the Parable of the Great Supper told by Jesus. But in that parable, in that story, the one who is forced to wait is God, and the one who makes God wait is man!

The story simply told is this: a man determines to give a feast for his friends. A preliminary announcement of this event is made up and down the land according to Eastern custom. At length the servants go out to extend specific invitations. "Come - the supper is ready". "But they all alike began to make excuses". One man said, "I have bought a field and must look it over". Another said, "I have purchased five yoke of oxen, and must test them". Another said, "I just got married and must spend some time with my wife".

There can be no doubt that in this parable the invitation to the feast represents man's invitation to participate in the Kingdom of God. Likewise, there can be no doubt that those who sent their regrets represent the general human response to God's merciful provision for our human needs. "Come - for all is now ready". This is the Gospel plea. "But they all alike began to make excuses". God can wait as far as we're concerned. We have other concerns to think about.

THE POINT OF THE PARABLE Jesus told this story to spike the pretensions of those who imagined that they had an inside track with God! The occasion was a lavish feast on the Sabbath day in the home of a ruler who happened to be a Pharisee. To the consternation of the assembled guests, Jesus had healed a man on their day of rest.

He further aroused their anger by chiding them for jockeying for the best seats:

"Why not sit in the lowest places when you come to an event like this so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, come up higher' for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted".

He then went on to give a lesson on etiquette that anticipated Emily Post by 2,000 years. He said:

"When you give a feast don't invite the rich who can return in kind, rather when you throw a party invite the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind. And you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just".

At this juncture one of the pious brothers stopped eating long enough to say "Ah, when the feast comes and we sit down at the Messiah's feet how happy we shall be!" One can imagine that others hearing that remark said to themselves, "My, I wish I had said that". But this bit of rhetoric was more than Jesus could take. The assumption that when the Messiah's feast was held this man would be there really turned Jesus off. He responded by saying, in effect, "Are you sure that you're going to make it?"

The truth is that many of those who take for granted that their hearts are with God and talk glibly about their identification with the will of God are often strangers to His grace. This is the grim point of the Parable of the Great Feast.

LOOK AT THE EXCUSES Look at the excuses. Some one has said that an excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. "I bought some land and I must go and look at it". "I bought some oxen and I must test them out". "I just got married so I'm understandably tied up for awhile".

It is important that we notice that each of these activities can be classified as good and lawful in itself. It is good that some people have land and oxen. Society needs food and clothing that come to us from the farm. It is good that a man marry; the family is still the basic unit of society. In fact, one of my friends at the 92nd Street "Y" told me this week that in the law of Deuteronomy provision is made for a man who marries to have a whole year to himself with his wife. According to the law,

"When a man hath taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business; but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken".

One year. We seem to be satisfied with a week in the islands, or a few days at Niagara Falls, or a couple of days at the Plaza.

I'm not altogether sure that a man who is under foot that long is really aiding and abetting his marriage. When George Weiss, the former GM of the New York Yankees, retired, his wife found him about the house more than she liked. She was heard to quip one day, "I married George for better or for word, but not for lunch".

Back to the Parable. These are all, in the main, legitimate functions of life - buying a field, purchasing oxen, marrying a wife. But this is precisely the point - the claims of the Kingdom of God are of such an ultimate character that even the good in our life should not prevent our saying yes!

I think these self-righteous dinner guests would have been relieved had Jesus spoken of bad excuses. If one invitee had said, "I'm planning to rob a bank that day in Jerusalem and I cannot come". Or, if another had said, "I'm ruining a black market in olive oil and I cannot come". Of, if another had said, "I've been with the bottle for over a week and I'm just too drunk to come". Such responses would have relieved the Pharisees. They could then have said, "These people were up to nothing good to begin with".

But the point of the parable is that these desires and experiences were very ordinary. They were neither criminal nor fanatical. These were just average people so preoccupied with the dailiness of life and its demands that even God could wait.

TRANSITION This ancient story still finds us vulnerable, I feel, to its searchings. Commentators are generally agreed that the primary meaning of this parable was to explain why the gospel which had first been given to the Jews was subsequently offered to the whole world.

When the host found that those who were first invited - the holy people - would not come, he commanded his servants to recruit guests from the broad streets and narrow lanes - i. e. the general masses of Judaism. When still more room remained, he asked his servants to go out again, this time into the highways and hedges. Gentiles were now to be included.

But surely no less important is the continuing meaning that this story holds for us down to the present time, and here I would set forth two points.

TOO ENGROSSED First, we human beings keep missing out on God's best for our lives because we are too engrossed in what our wealth and our technology and our families can give us without God. Between God's "Seek ye first" and man's "But let me first...." the destiny of our souls is written. Each generation has a different way of being "unready" for the invitation. The excuses may change their focus, but the set of the heart remains very much the same. All of us have a way of indulging in those harmless preoccupations which eventually take precedence for us over the very claims of God himself.

I am much interested in the way in which newspaper editors decide which news items will be printed side by side. This is called juxtaposition. Some items that are innocent enough in themselves can be severely damaged by incriminating juxtaposition. For example, a story about an actress in court who is concerned about the loss of \$500,000 in jewelry and furs, and irate that the police have not caught the bandits, suffers when placed beside a column telling about hunger in India and tens of thousands dying for want of bread. Juxtaposition is a placing close together or side by side especially for comparison or contrast. Occasionally the juxtaposition of my sermon title and name on the same line in the Sunday bulletin will cause me discomfort. Like the Sunday I preached on John the Baptist and called it "The Preacher In the Wilderness"....and several spaces away was "Mr Clarke".

What I'm getting at, however is this: what you are doing with your life may be innocent enough in itself, except when it leads you to neglect something more important. There is surely nothing wrong with playing a violin, assuming you can play it well. But Nero has gone down negatively in history because he played his violin at the wrong time. There was a fire going on.

There is nothing wrong with a man jumping into a private plane and wanting to take off. But Howard Hughes did that minutes after Minagua, Nicaragua was stricken by an earthquake. Howard Hughes couldn't wait to get out and Roberto Clemente could not wait to get in. Some actions by themselves are innocent until they are juxtaposed with the claims of a higher call. The good is frequently the enemy of the best.

OUR HEARTS The second meaning of the parable is that our hearts are usually less with God than we think. We make our excuses and I've heard just about all of them over the years, but the plain truth is that in many cases we just don't have an appetite for the king's feast. Yet, we have enough of the fear of God left in us not to want to relinquish the invitation altogether.

A..M. Hunter has suggested that instead of calling this the Parable of the

Great Supper we should call it The Parable of the Contemptuous Guests. "Excuse me, but I've just bought some land". "Excuse me, but I've just bought some oxen". "Excuse me, but I've just been married". The besetting problem is not the surface "reason", but basic unbelief. This is tougher to get to..with which to grapple.

I mention this because I see the Christian Church, especially in America, playing out a long season of self-flagellation. We hold ourselves responsible that the world is not responding to the Gospel, that our churches are not as crowded as they once were, that religion presently lacks the bite and thrust of earlier days. We conclude that perhaps we're not packaging it right. So a host of people set out to make it more appealing. Others insist that we ought to change the content somewhat. There must be something amiss with the message if the world doesn't buy it. And so we set out and make vast alterations in theology, liturgy and mission.

Still others say that the problem is not in the packaging or content, but it is in the distribution. They urge us to become more energetic in the pursuit of modern ways of getting the message out. It would be foolish to object to any of these approaches. In fact, at times I have been part of some of them myself. But I think it is time for the church to recognize that there is such a thing as unbelief. Regardless of how the Gospel is presented, defined and distributed some people plainly want nothing to do with the feast.

Jesus turned to his generation and said, "We played funeral and you did not weep. We played wedding and you did not dance. What do you want? John came among you in his austerity and you rejected him. I came among you and went to your feasts and you called me a winebibber and a glutton. What do you want?"

And so we make our excuses. The weather isn't right. The church school rooms are inadequate. The ushers don't smile enough or they smile too much, or they're all men. The sermons are too long or too short. The organist plays too loud. We address God as father instead of mother. If our hunger were desperate enough, we would not be fussy and picky. We would be grateful that all things are ready and that there is still room for us.

An interesting fable comes to us from the Orient. A certain man went to his neighbor to borrow a rope. The neighbor replied, "I cannot lend it to you for I am using it myself to tie up a heap of sand". "But" said the first, "You cannot tie up sand with a rope". "Oh" replied the other, "Why you can do almost anything with a rope when you do not wish to lend it".

CLOSING AND DECISION The Kingdom of God is at hand! Jesus announced it to be so and it is so. Come - for all is now ready. There is no lack on God's side. The joyous function of the Christian Church is to go up and down the land and around the world saying to men and women who are hungry for the very words of life, "Still there is room - for you".

Any unreadiness belongs to us - not to God. Unfortunately, our "sooner or later" often adds up to "never". One of the functions of Jesus in the midst of His Church is to evoke a decision for the banquet. In one way or another, he keeps asking us if we intend to come. The deepest tragedy of life is not the foolish things we do, or the many wise and good things that we fail to do. The great tragedy of life is that we reject God's greatest gift. "But they all like began to make excuses".

There is a line in the "Music Man" where the band director turns to a somewhat straight-laced librarian and says,

"Keep putting off till tomorrow what can be done today, and you'll soon find that your life has been nothing other than a collection of yesterdays".

PRAYER In the light of thy word, O God, help us to look to our priorities and our affections and we prepare to enter this Season of Lent.

If our religion be a matter of speech and form alone, and not of the spirit and the heart, claim us by thy love this hour and make us forever different from this day on. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.