

Luke 14:1, 7-14 – Preached on September 2, 2007

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “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. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

It's breakfast time, 6:30 am. She has never really been a morning person, but here she is, standing in the kitchen, trying to cook her children a nice warm breakfast before they head off to school. Her one daughter is ten, going on thirty. She already wants to wear make-up and insists that she needs a cell phone. Her other child, a son, is thirteen and is a freshman in high school. He is a good student and wants to play basketball this year.

It seems that she's not quite sure what to do with herself now, not since her husband suddenly left her a year ago. She makes sure to wake up before the kids do, to make their breakfast and send them off...but then, more often than not, she ends up back in bed, not wanting to face the day. She knows she should get a job, she has a college degree, but she just can't work up the energy to get out and apply for one. Maybe next week. Or next month. Right now all she can do is go through the motions.

Her friends call her just about every week. They invite her to dinner or to a movie, but she always finds excuses not to go. She doesn't want to face them. They're happy. They aren't trying to raise two children alone. They don't understand.

She goes to church when she has the energy. Her kids are in Sunday school and on good days, she goes to church when they're in their class. The kids are still excited about the new education wing that was built last year. She likes her church, she feels safe there. At first she was angry with God. Angry because God didn't help the marriage.

She's not angry anymore, just sad. She prays every day. She prays for strength, for comfort, for her children. At church she prays that she won't have to sit alone in her pew.

Her kids bound down the stairs to get their breakfast...they gobble it down, give their mother a kiss on the cheek, and head out to their bus stop. And here she is, alone once again. She will have to take her kids to a church worship service and potluck dessert tonight, but that's not for another twelve hours. So for now, she heads back to bed.

It's lunchtime. That means nothing to him. He doesn't know when his last meal was, he has no idea when his next meal will be. It's probably been two days since he ate something other than stuff out of the garbage dumpsters.

He is nineteen. He is a runaway living in a small Midwestern town. It's surprising – even in a small town, people don't really seem to notice that there are homeless people. And to say that he's "living" in a small town really isn't true – he's surviving. But barely.

Summer is over now, school has started again, and he knows that soon cold weather will be coming. He knows that winter in the Midwest can be brutal. He doesn't know what he will do then. Right now he is living in a state park. It is pretty easy to blend in with the campers that come and go.

He sleeps in the woods most nights, it's a good place to hide because no one goes there at night. He found a small cave that serves as a shelter during storms. He showers at the park facilities, and it is amazing how many people leave their soap and shampoo in the stalls.

He doesn't know what he is going to do with his life. He knows he can't go home – he would rather be homeless than go home to his abusive father. Right now his biggest concern is finding food.

He used to be involved with his youth group at home. He liked the youth leader and she even told him once that he would make a good youth leader or even a pastor. He believes in God, and prays every day. Sometimes his prayers are nothing more than whispers of help. Other times his prayers are shouts of hurt and anger about his family life and his situation.

His plan today is to find a newspaper and look at the Help Wanted ads. Maybe someone will hire him. And later tonight he will go to a local church. They are having a potluck dessert of some kind and the community people are invited. They are having a church service beforehand and he will go to that, too. He will pretend that he really belongs there.

It's dinner time and across town. He hasn't sat at their dining room table in weeks. Now he eats his meals with his wife, at the nursing home where she has been for two months. She fell and broke her hip, and the recovery has been slow. She has been pretty upbeat and positive during her time in the nursing home, and he admires that about her. In fact, he admires everything about her.

They will be married 56 years this coming winter, and she is and will always be his life. They live in an old farmhouse – it's the house where their three children were raised – two twin daughters and a boy. He remembers with joy all the memories that they made as a family.

They ran a dairy farm. It was difficult work, but rewarding. The children were very helpful and rarely complained about doing chores. And his wife...she was the one who really kept the family running. Everyday she would cook delicious meals (he gained 20 pounds in their first year of marriage because of her cooking) and help the kids get ready for school. She was on the parent teacher organization and was even president of that for awhile.

She is still famous for her chocolate chip cookies and her feisty personality. He doesn't know how to live without her at home. He hates going home at night, to a dark house. The house has gotten pretty dirty in the time she has been in the nursing home. He just can't keep up with the dusting and vacuuming and mopping. She is the one who always took care of that.

He goes to church almost every week. They have been members of the same church for as long as he can remember – it's where they met – at a Luther League outing. He loves his church and volunteers for a lot of things. He helped build their new education wing last year and he enjoys seeing the children using it for Sunday school and youth group.

His faith has been steady his whole life. He trusts God and prays when he remembers to. But he has been begging God lately – to help his wife heal, to bring her back home to him soon. He desperately misses her.

Tonight he will go to church. There is a worship service and then a potluck dessert. He tried to make his wife's chocolate chip cookies, but accidentally put in baking powder instead of baking soda – and he had to spit out his miserable attempt. He will go tonight and once again beg God to bring his wife home.

It's time for church. The young mother climbed out of bed around 4:00 in the afternoon, a half hour before her kids came home. She took a quick shower, cleaned up the mess from breakfast, and had dinner started when they walked in the door – they will never know what she does all day.

She herds them into their mini van and they make it to church a few minutes before the service starts. There are a lot of people here tonight and most have already claimed their seats in the back of the church...they find a pew closer to the front and sit down.

The nineteen year old runaway slips in through the church doors just behind a mother and her two children. He pretends to himself that he belongs with that family – that he is a part of them. He sits down in the same pew as they do, which is near the front. The young girl looks over at him and gives him a smile. It is nice to have someone smile at him.

The older man comes in the church doors and sees that his usual pew, which is in the back, on the left side, is taken. He scans the congregation and sees a spot for him near the front, next to a young boy.

He walks up, asks the boy if he can sit next to him, and sits down. He hasn't seen that boy before. He looks very thin. Next to him are a young family that he recognizes. It is nice to sit in a pew with young people. Reminds him of his grandchildren.

The church service begins. Tonight the focus is on food and meals, which is different. The pastor talks about a story in the Bible where Jesus teaches people to invite those who are poor and blind and lame to come eat with them. The pastor says that Jesus invites everyone to come and eat...which is why they are having a community dessert potluck after the service where all are welcome.

The nineteen year old boy is practically in tears at this point – he feels welcomed here.

And then the pastor says that all are welcome at the Lord's Table, the table of holy communion. All are welcome to share in the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples and to receive the living presence of Jesus Christ in their lives.

The young mother knows those words are for her. She needs to receive Christ's presence. She needs to be healed of this depression. She needs to be welcomed at this table. And the older man knows those words are for him, too. He needs this community...he needs to receive strength to be able to make it through this time.

And then it comes time for holy communion to be served. And the pew holding the young family, the nineteen year old boy, and the older man are ushered up to the front. And they walk up to the altar rail, kneel down, and hold out their hands.

Each one of them has a different need, each one of them has a different ailment...and each one of them is welcomed at the table where Jesus Christ is the host. They come. They receive the living bread, the wine of forgiveness. And they each hear the words, "the body and blood of Christ, given FOR YOU." FOR YOU.

And they know they matter to God. When that wafer is pressed into their hands, they know that it is God's presence they are receiving. And each is given strength for another day, for another week.

And we, too, are invited to come and share in the holy meal. We are invited to come. Hands out, ready to receive the presence of Jesus Christ. No ailment or worry will be turned away. You are welcome here, at the table of God. And may you hear those two words, "FOR YOU" and know that they are truly meant for you...for each one of you. Amen.