

Sermon Note: Open Invitation

Second Sunday in Lent

Introduction

As we continue our Lenten series *The Last Supper: Conversations That Led to the Cross*, we turn from a field to a dinner table. A host has prepared a large feast and invited many people. When the time comes, the replies arrive one by one: a new farm to inspect, new oxen to check, a new marriage to tend. The excuses are completely reasonable, and the host sends his servant into the streets anyway. First to the busy streets, then to the highways and back alleys. "There is still room," the servant reports. And the host says: go find more people. This week, Luke 14 turns our attention to a table that keeps expanding past every expectation of who belongs there, and to the question of what it means to find yourself included somewhere you assumed you weren't welcome.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru9wXF5Cm70>

In this clip from *The Greatest Showman* (2017), P.T. Barnum opens his circus to performers who have spent their lives on the margins — and watches what happens when people who've been told to hide finally step into the light.

Why This Video?

The performers hesitate before they go on — years of being told to stay out of sight have a way of holding people in place even when the door opens. The crowd hesitates too: some look away, a mother steps in front of her daughter. And then something changes. Curiosity becomes attention, attention becomes engagement, and a crowd that initially recoiled ends up on its feet. The invitation was more than anyone could have imagined, and the people who assumed the invitation wasn't for them are the ones who fill the house.

Video Discussion Questions

1. The performers hesitate before going on. What do you think is going through their minds in that moment?
2. The initial audience reaction is shock. Some are visibly alarmed, some look away, a mother steps in front of her daughter. When does the crowd turn?
3. At a certain point, Barnum himself steps into the performance. Is this significant? What could this mean to him? To the other performers? To the audience? What does it mean to you?
4. Part of the song lyric is: *the lie that you need to hide your face*. What do you think this means? What does it take to stop believing these kinds of lies?
5. The performers grow visibly bolder as the song goes on. What do you think makes that possible?

6. The bridge opens wide: *Come one, come all, come in, come on — to anyone who's bursting with a dream, to anyone who's searching for a way to break free.* Who does that invitation reach? Who might have assumed it wasn't for them?
7. When have you been surprised to find yourself included somewhere you assumed wasn't for you?
8. By the end, the house is sold out and the audience is on its feet. What happened to the proverbial distance between the performers and the crowd?

Luke 14:16-24 (CEB)

¹⁶Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. ¹⁷When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' ¹⁸One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' ¹⁹Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' ²⁰Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' ²¹When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' ²²The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' ²³The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. ²⁴I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Scripture Study Questions

1. The guests don't refuse rudely, they apologize and ask to be excused. What does that tell you about the kind of people who were invited first?
2. Bishop Willimon points out that none of the excuses involve evil things: new property, new animals, a new marriage. How do these good things make bad excuses?
3. The servant reports back: "Your instructions have been followed and there is still room." What do you make of those five words in the context of the parable? What do you think these five words mean for us today?
4. The host sends the servant out a second time: first to the streets, then to the highways and back alleys. Who ends up at the table, and what does that tell you about how the host sees the party?
5. The host says, "Not one of those who were [initially] invited will taste my dinner." Is this judgment, grief, or something else entirely?
6. When have you made a good excuse for something that, looking back, you wish you hadn't missed?
7. Bishop Willimon reads this parable as an invitation to a feast that's *already underway*. What do you think this means? Where do you see that feast happening?

Weekly Action

Easter is five weeks away. The host in this parable doesn't wait for people to show up on their own — he sends the servant out with a specific invitation. This week, do the same thing. Get a piece of paper (or open a note on your phone) and write down the names of people you'd like to invite to church for Easter. Don't edit the list while you're making it. Just write.

Then pray over the names, one by one. Ask God to prepare them to receive the invitation, and to give you the right moment to offer it. Later in Lent, you'll have a chance to follow through. This week: just make the list.

Prayer

God of the still-open table, you set a feast and keep sending your servant back into the streets when there is still room. When we convince ourselves the invitation is for us alone, remind us: go find more people. Give us eyes to see the feast that is already underway, and the courage to extend the invitation to someone who assumed it wasn't meant for them. Amen.