

The Great Reversal  
Luke 14:15-24

By

Joey Novak, Ph. D. Candidate

July 4, 2010

San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
*www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com*

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

# The Great Reversal

Scripture: Luke 14:8-24

May 30, 2010

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

He came speaking parables. In Matthew's gospel, we read: "And Jesus told the crowd all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing."<sup>1</sup>

He came speaking parables. Stories of farmers and fathers; of wealthy and poor; of kings and servants: Stories about lost sons, inadequate business managers, wandering sheep, wounded travelers, faulty fig trees; persistent widows...And the list goes on. And the remarkable thing about these stories is that they had the ability to transform the abstract into the concrete.

The abstractness of the end of the world becomes a shepherd sorting his flock into herds of sheep and herds of goats. The abstractness of the Kingdom of God becomes a mustard seed that grew into a mustard tree. Or man who finds a pearl of great price. Or a man throwing a dinner party.

Jesus came speaking parables. Jesus came telling stories. And most of these stories ended in a way that was not expected. Most of them flipped things upside down.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a story in which the hero is not the priest or the Levite but a half-bred and shameful Samaritan. This was not expected. The parable of the Prodigal Son is a story in which a rebellious son ends up getting a party and a faithful son gets left outside. This was not expected. The parable of the Lost Sheep is a story in which a shepherd leaves his flock unattended and vulnerable in order to find a missing sheep. This was not expected.

The stories tend to reverse many of the societal expectations about God. God was the father who embraces the rebellious son. God was the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep. God is the master who pays all his servants the same. God is the king who forgives even the biggest debts.

Jesus told stories that corrected some fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of God and God's kingdom. Essentially, things are backward. As Luke's gospel puts it: God hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted that of low degree. This is the great reversal. The world and its wisdom get set on its head. So it is with our text today.

The story starts innocently enough. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. He stops for the night in an unnamed town and is invited to dinner with some of the religious folk of the town in one of their homes. And Jesus obliges. So far, so good. But this is a dinner with religious folks. Anyone ever been to a church potluck? I grew up in a Baptist church. Every other Sunday night we'd have a church potluck in our fellowship hall. The chicken was always cooked too long, the rolls were always a little too crusty, and the potato salad always had a little too much mayonnaise. Nevertheless, we filed into the hall grabbed our plate and tried to find a seat. Yet for some reason, they never set up enough

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:34

tables and chairs.

We were good Midwestern kids with good midwestern values: we knew the seats were for our elders (who, to a fifth-grader, is anyone in high school or older). We were left to the floor. It did not matter how hard we tried, how fast we got into line, how quickly we staked out a place at a table. In no time at all, some gentle adult, usually an elder, would come and inform us in a no-nonsense manner that we needed to vacate our seats. That's how we ended up on the floor: where, I suppose, our food ended up anyway, so it kind of made sense.

Now, as any potluck engineer will tell you, certain seats were infinitely better than others. The best table was the center table where the board of deacons sat with the pastor. Next was the table in the northwest corner of the room where the music pastor sat flanked by prominent members of the choir. Next, in the southeast corner, the high school kids sat and goofed around with the youth pastor. Other adults gathered themselves into their respective social groups, careful not to allow Mrs. Albright to sit next to Mrs. Vandermark, since at the last potluck, Mrs. Vandermark called Mrs. Albright's pineapple upside down cake dry.

Officially we did not have assigned seats. Unofficially, we all knew where we were going to sit. We each knew our place. Every other Sunday night, our place was on the floor.

So Jesus shows up to a church potluck for some homemade potato salad. But it's a dinner with religious folks so I guess that rules out the possibility of a nice polite discussion of cars, sports, or plumbing issues. A dinner with religious leaders meant shattering the cardinal rule of social etiquette: Speak of anything but politics and religion. And sure enough, Jesus hardly gets in the door before the tenor of the conversation becomes quite preachy. In fact, as soon as Jesus notices that everyone is vying for the best seats, he starts a sermon.

First, he tells those rushing to the best seats that when you're invited to a party; don't seek out the best seats. After all, if you pick the best seat and the host tells you to move to a lesser seat, you will be embarrassed and shamed. So, pick the worst seat and, if the host tells you to move to a better seat, you'll be honored.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, Jesus says, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

By now, the guests might be wondering: "Who invited this guy?" Here we are having a party, having a good time, and this guy comes along and embarrasses us. Then, to make matters worse, Jesus turns to the host of the party and says, "When you're throwing a party, don't invite your friends or relatives, or rich neighbors. After all, they'll just invite you to their next party and you'll end up paying each other back."

Meals in the first century were one of the primary ways of demonstrating social status. Who you ate with determined who you were associated with. And nobody wanted to invite someone of lesser

social status to their table lest people assume they too were of a lesser status. So the rich ate with the rich, the poor ate with the poor; the religious leaders ate with religious leaders; the lepers with the lepers, and so on. To eat together was to say that you were on the same social level.

But Jesus says, “Don’t you dare invite people who can afford to pay you back. Don’t you dare invite people who make your social status gleam a bit brighter. Instead, you are to invite: The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

Four groups of people who were perpetually uninvited to social occasions. Four groups of people who were always left off of the VIP list.

Should we invite the Timmermans? Well, it’s a black-tie event, and Mr. Timmerman just lost his job and probably can’t afford a tuxedo, let’s not embarrass him by inviting him. What about Ron Rieman? Who? Oh you know Ron, that Vietnam vet, lost his leg to a grenade, kind of imbalanced, always talking to himself? Chances are he’s going to scare the children. No social capital. No etiquette. No money. No invitations.

But Jesus says, “Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind and you will finally understand what the Kingdom of God is all about.” When you invite these people, you’ll understand that in God’s eyes, we are all poor, crippled, lame, and blind. In a nutshell, practice true charity, not social betterment. End of lesson. End of sermon. And I suppose that Jesus could have dusted his hands off, satisfied with his little lesson on the ethics of social interaction. He could have said amen to his moralistic homily on the perils of being the first in line, of the problems of only hosting dinners for wealthy and famous people. In other words, it could have been a much shorter story.

But someone had to say something. It was “that guy.” We all know “that guy.” The person who always has something to say; some quip to make, some toast to give, some blessing to offer, some food for thought to serve up, some wisecrack to slip in; someone who always has to have the last word. It’s almost like he doesn’t realize that everyone kind of groans when he heads toward the microphone. That guy. And so, “that guy” raises his voice and his glass and offers a toast, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” Mild enough of a statement. Now, perhaps he had a bit too much wine, or perhaps he was so excited that he and Jesus agreed on the fact that there would be a resurrection, or perhaps both. Either way, the man opens his mouth and offers a toast to the Kingdom of God. “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God.” I imagine the others in the room responded: “here-here” toasting to the coming day of blessing. Jesus is silent, however.

Now there really isn’t anything wrong with what the guest said. It’s not bad theology or impiety. It’s not anything that the other guests, or even Jesus for that matter, would disagree with. It’s actually a pretty fair appraisal. Blessed IS anyone who eats bread in the Kingdom of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich foods. “In those days”, the prophet Joel proclaims, “You shall eat in plenty

and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And you will never again be put to shame.”<sup>2</sup>

The guest wasn't wrong. He said it truly: Blessed is anyone who eats bread in the Kingdom of God! Because anyone eating a meal in the kingdom of God is a person whom God considers a friend and not an enemy. A meal was a symbol of equity and right relationship; of unity and bonding. Anyone sharing a table with the God of Hosts will be united to him forever. They will be blessed!

But it wasn't what he said that was the problem. It was how he said it. It was as if he looked around the room, met the well-educated eyes of the guests, listened to the religious fervor in their common language, smelled the clean-smelling oils and perfumes on feet and beards, tasted the delicious Sabbath meal and blinked, for he could imagine the Kingdom of God looking much the same; full of educated, religious, like-minded, clean, well-fed people. And so he raises his glass, and offers a toast to a kingdom that will look like this dinner.

And Jesus meets his eye and tells them a story:

A wealthy man was having a dinner party. The invites went out, the RSVPs were in, the calf was slaughtered and prepared, the wine was poured and strained. The tables were set, the lamps were lit. And he sent his servants to go tell everyone that the party has started. But everyone who said they would come changed their mind. They all had reasonable excuses: One had to go investigate a piece of property he just bought. One just got married. One had to go test drive a new ox-cart. Even though their excuses were valid, the host was upset. All the food would go to waste. So the man sent his servants out to gather all the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, and to bring them to the party. They came, but there was still food to spare and wine to go around. So the host sent his servants out again, this time to force everyone they could find to come and eat. Once they did so, they were told to put a 'No Vacancy' sign out on the yard, in case those who were first invited decided to change their minds. The party is full, there is no room.

Who eats and drinks at the party?

The poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame,

Who doesn't eat and drink at the party?

The ones with invitations. The ones who had the right social credentials.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted that of low degree.

This is the parable of the great reversal. Those with invitations in hand are not allowed in and those who would never have been invited are brought in. So Jesus says, "Yes, blessed is anyone who eats bread in the Kingdom of Heaven, but don't forget that God hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted that of low degree.

---

<sup>2</sup> Joel 2:26

In the Kingdom of God, the well-educated, the well-fed, the well-smelling, the well-intentioned, the well-cultured will look around the room and wonder where all the good seats went. For the Kingdom will be full of those of low degree,  
whom the world scorns,  
who lie in the streets of our cities,  
who pray for bread because their children are starving,  
who plead with doctors for medicine to relieve their anguish...

It will be full of disenfranchised immigrants, impoverished widows, the mentally imbalanced, the socially unfit, the economically tragic, the medically ill, those who are too young, those who are too old, those who don't fit in, those who work three jobs and still can't afford the rent. These people will sit at fine tables, and eat fine foods and drink fine wine. This is the great reversal.

God hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted that of low degree.

And so we come to this table. This symbol of a world to come. We have come to share a meal. But we have come to make a political and theological statement as well. We have prepared bread and wine under the shadow of the promise that in Christ, there is now no longer any division between the people of God. No longer can any ethnic, economic, social, or gender barrier separate us. We are, all of us, united. Ph.Ds, teachers, doctors, lawyers, consultants, ministers, secretaries all bound together at one table and made to be one people. Some of us have come because we have been invited and we have accepted the invitation. Some of us have come because we are the poor, the blind, the lame, or the crippled. Some of us have come because we have been compelled by some force beyond our comprehension. No matter why you have come, you have come. And you are welcome at this table.

For Jesus Christ, the eternal God-made-flesh is our host. And he has invited all people, from the north and south, and from the east and west to his dinner. For he is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is the one who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and he has made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Look! He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him! And He will put down the mighty from their seats, and he will exalt that of low degree.

The fruit of the earth; this bread; has become the bread of life. The fruit of the vine; this wine; has become the cup of our salvation. An impoverished meal has become a rich feast for all people from every tribe and tongue and nation. This is the great reversal. Amen.