



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Starving At the Banquet: A Parable

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16; John 6:24-35

Once upon a time in place that seemed far, far away but was, in reality, as close as your heartbeat, there was a kingdom inhabited by Beautiful People. There were people of every shape, size, color and characteristic. Walking through the streets of the kingdom, one could see faces like creamy porcelain and as rich as ebony. Brown and tan, olive and peach, bronze and ruddy faces were among them, too. And looking around, you could find people who were short and stout and some who were tall and lean. There were young people and older ones. Some were physically strong and agile. Some had nimble and perceptive minds. Some could create astounding works of art and music, while others could fashion useful objects with their hands.

The people of the kingdom spoke many languages and possessed infinite combinations of talents and interests and abilities. They all had different mannerisms and habits, different ways of laughing and speaking, and different perspectives for looking at the world. Even with all the diversity and difference, in their beauty and worth there was a striking resemblance among them, for theirs was a rich and vibrant community of neighbors, and the attributes they had in common—the ones which mattered most—far outweighed their differences.

And all these Beautiful People lived in a Beautiful Place. The kingdom was filled with color and variety, splendor and majesty—with mountains and oceans, lovely and fragrant trees and flowers yielding every good thing to eat, and magnificent creatures of every kind. Their home provided delights and wonders for their senses; opportunities to learn and explore, for work and play; and the possibility of purpose and belonging for everyone. It was a Beautiful Place where they could all prosper and thrive, where they should all be grateful to live, among people from whom they ought to have found companionship and nurture.

The kingdom was governed by a kind and generous Ruler. The Lord of the Kingdom had crafted this magnificent place from nothing and designed it

as a place of welcome and acceptance for all. The Ruler was gracious and just and cared for the well-being of every person and creature who lived there. The kingdom supplied everything that each of its citizens needed for a full, content, and meaningful life.

Each day, the Lord of the Kingdom prepared beautifully appointed tables and filled them to overflowing with the most delicious foods of every kind and invited the residents of the kingdom to dine. There was no fee to partake of the banquet, and everyone was encouraged to attend. The feast was splendid in every way, with plenteous food and drink of the highest quality, beautifully presented, served in a lovely garden lush with blooms and swirling with soothing melodies masterfully performed by the most gifted musicians. Comfortable furnishings, welcoming smiles on the faces of charming companions, and enchanting conversations were as abundant as the food. And every day, the Lord of the Kingdom mingled among the people, welcoming everyone to the feast, arms extended wide to embrace each guest, taking delight in sharing the bounty of the Beautiful Place with all who lived there.

But even in a kingdom as peaceful and prosperous as this one, there were sometimes challenges, so the Lord's banquets also provided a place for those who had problems to seek advice and support, for those who were not getting along to settle their disputes, and for anyone feeling lonely or discouraged to find friendship and acceptance. The Lord of the Kingdom did everything possible to ensure that the banquets would offer not only nourishment for their bodies but also nurture for their souls, stimulation for their minds, and encouragement for their hearts, believing that if the people knew joy and wholeness, they would be free to be compassionate toward one another, successful in their work and relationships, and devoted in their love for their Lord, their neighbors, and their kingdom.

One day, the Lord of the Kingdom noticed that some of the Beautiful People had not come to the banquet. Troubled by their absence from the celebration, the Lord went out to look for them and found them still at work. Though the Lord encouraged them to join the feast and assured them that they were missed, they insisted that they had too much work to do. The Lord of the Kingdom asked why they were still toiling away rather than enjoying the bounty offered to them. "We know that you provide for us," they said, "but we have become worried that your provisions might run out or that you may not always be so generous to us, so we will work a little longer in order to store up extra supplies for ourselves." Though the gracious Ruler assured them that the kingdom provided enough for everyone, they trusted in their own abilities more than the goodness and abundance of the Lord or the kingdom, so they

continued to work and store, to work and store. As the days went on, more and more frequently they missed the nourishment and community of the feasts, increasingly failed to notice the beauty and splendor of the kingdom, and neglected relationships with their neighbors. And never feeling satisfied that they had saved enough, these Beautiful People spent more and more of their days working and storing so that their attention was no longer focused on love for their Lord, their neighbors, or their kingdom.

The other Beautiful People noticed their absence, too, and encouraged them to come back to the banquet. They said that they would, as soon as they had worked enough, but as they attended less and less often, the other neighbors became at first sad and then frustrated. They began to look on how their neighbors were working and storing and began to worry that perhaps they should be doing the same. Though they loved the Lord of the Kingdom and their times of fellowship at the feasts and were grateful for the generous gifts, they also began to feel insecure. At first they worried that perhaps they weren't as strong or smart or productive as their neighbors and wondered if they should also miss the banquets on occasion in order to work and store more for themselves. Then, as time went on, they began to feel envy that their neighbors had accumulated more and began to question the motives of their neighbors. They started to wonder why the Lord of the Kingdom had allowed some of the Beautiful People to miss the feasts and to turn their backs on the community, rather than compelling them to come. And soon their questions and envy turned to resentment. As their resentments grew, their focus was also no longer on love for their Lord, their neighbors, or their kingdom.

As the people grew more and more distracted, and resentments and insecurities increased among them, the Lord of the Kingdom began to grieve what was happening among the Beautiful People. But the kind and compassionate Ruler never failed to spread a bountiful banquet in hopes that everyone would return and never missed an opportunity to extend an invitation and express a fervent desire for all the Beautiful People to come and enjoy the feast.

But it only took a little while before resentments among the neighbors turned to suspicion, and suspicion turned to hatred, and the Beautiful People who were once neighbors began to take sides. Factions formed between those who called their neighbors greedy and those who called their neighbors lazy. Suspicions caused the groups of neighbors to notice the differences among them for the first time and to make assumptions about those who looked or spoke or thought differently, no longer seeing the beauty and richness in their diversity but drawing lines of exclusion because of their

differences. Throughout the Beautiful Place, fences and walls began to divide the pristine land, neighbors were met with locked doors instead of open arms, and warm greetings were replaced with cold stares and disparaging words.

As the divisions among them grew, so did their neglect of the other neighbors and of the kingdom itself. Many of them were too busy with other concerns to attend the banquet anymore, and some refused to sit down at the table with the other group of neighbors. Hostilities and suspicions continued to spread, and the Beautiful People failed to attend to their love for their Lord, their neighbors, and their kingdom more and more. Within the groups that had formed, some wanted to return to the banquet but were too preoccupied or embarrassed to attend. Others claimed that they no longer felt welcome and hardened their hearts, not only to their opposing neighbors, but even to the Lord of the Kingdom and the kingdom itself. Some felt sorry that they had left and longed to go back, but when they arrived, they peered in on the extravagant feast and felt too ashamed and unworthy to enter. So, they became more and more isolated from one another and from the gifts available to them, their bodies hungry from lack of food and their spirits languishing from lack of community despite the generosity of their Ruler and the abundance of every resource they needed to thrive.

There were some of the Beautiful People who continued to feast at the banquet each day, and they did their best to enjoy the welcome and generosity of the Lord of the Kingdom and the companionship of their neighbors. But even as they feasted on such goodness, awareness of the brokenness of their community weighed heavily on their hearts, crowded out their thoughts of joy and gratitude, and infected their fellowship with insecurities and sadness. Much of their attention and effort became focused on how to heal the divisions among their neighbors, and even they felt increasingly lonely and discouraged. They saw the broken-heartedness of the Lord of the Kingdom because of the enmity among the Beautiful People and noticed the neglect and deterioration of their once-splendid kingdom. But despite their discouragement, their continued fellowship with their Lord and with one another allowed them to have hope that the Beautiful People and their Beautiful Place could be restored.

Legend has it that even though animosities and divisions still exist among the Beautiful People, the Lord of the Kingdom continues to prepare a rich and generous banquet on a table that is long and wide enough to welcome all who will come. I am told that when you encounter these Beautiful People from the Beautiful Kingdom—no matter what their division or faction, no matter their appearance or opinion—you will recognize them. For in their beauty and worth there is a striking resemblance among them, for theirs is a

rich and vibrant community of neighbors, and the attributes they have in common—the ones which matter most—even now, far outweigh their differences. And if you are still not certain who they are, just listen for the voice of the Lord of the Kingdom who continues to walk among them inviting them, urging them, to come back to the feast.

Let us pray:

We gather today around your feast, Lord of life, as grateful children. Delighted and humbled by your bounty, we celebrate gifts of food and shelter, of colors that dance at dawn and dusk, of the sounds of laughter and music and summer rain. We marvel at the majesty and intricacy of creation, at lines etched on the faces of grandparents, and joy and trust lit in the faces of children. You have set before us a banquet of opportunity and experiences, of diversity and beauty, of community and hope, of mercy and grace. As we feast on your goodness, may our hands extend in hospitality to welcome others to the table, may our minds extend in understanding to the wisdom of your purpose and plan, and may our hearts extend in openness to every possibility of the fullness and abundance of life in your kingdom. Amen.

Almighty and Everlasting God, we gather around your table to offer our praise for your many blessings to us. You give us life and then fill our lives with an abundance of gifts that give our days meaning and purpose: work and play which allow us to provide for ourselves and use our talents and resources for the good of others, the beauty of your creation which inspires and delights us, friends and family with whom to share the joys and challenges of this journey, and your grace which sustains us through our moments of celebration and sorrow. In all circumstances, O Lord, you have offered your mercy through the sending of your Son Jesus Christ and your presence through your Spirit who continues to dwell within and among us. For these and all of the gracious gifts which come from your generous hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

We come, too, O God, because we confess that we need the renewal which your grace offers to us at this table. We are sometimes a forgetful people, so we need to be reminded. We are often an impatient people, so we need a time of stillness and reflection, a time of listening for your voice and waiting for you Spirit. We are sometimes a stubborn people, so we need to be reshaped, molded again in the likeness of Christ who gave himself for us.

We come seeking your guidance and grace in the daily demands of our lives and the lives of others. Too many in our world live in the midst of violence or unrest. For these, O Lord, empower us to be messengers of your peace. Too many in our city suffer because of poverty, neglect or hopelessness. For these, O Lord, enable us to offer compassion. Too many of our own number struggle because of sickness or loneliness or worry. For these, O Lord, inspire us to extend hospitality and companionship that will bring healing and comfort. Too many of us live with fear or insecurity or doubt because of strained relationships, perplexing circumstances or uncertain futures. For each of us and all of us, O Lord, grant us grace enough for this day and hope for all our days to come.

As we join our brothers and sisters in this place and believers of all times and places to feast at your table, may we be reminded of the wonder that is ours because we are a people created in your image, the love that is ours because we are a people redeemed, the joy that is ours because we are a people who hold the promises of abundant life now and eternal life with you. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we make these and all our prayers. Amen.