

The Banquet Where Everyone Belongs

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[0 : 00] So a few years back, I was working on my Master's of Divinity degree, and I found myself in a setting in which I had never really envisioned myself.

! See, at my seminary, as at most seminaries, you are expected to take a certain number of credit hours in pastoral counseling. But those classes were among my least favorites.

And not because the material wasn't interesting, but rather because the gap between the theory and the practice always seemed so wide to me.

Because of that, I decided to finish my pastoral counseling by doing what is known as clinical pastoral education, or CPE. The foundation of CPE is basically that you enter an environment where there's great spiritual and emotional need.

A hospital, a prison, a military base. And you learn kind of spiritual and psychological skills through actually working with people.

[1 : 07] It's basically like a clinical rotation for a pastor. My site assignment was the National Institutes of Health, the hospital in there. And I don't really love hospitals.

I'm not particularly interested in the finer details of human anatomy. I watched Grey's Anatomy for a long time, and the intrigue over McSteamy and Callie's relationship, because it was interesting, was as close as I ever really wanted to be to a hospital setting.

Some of y'all know. But spending mornings in these intensive learning sessions with my cohort and afternoon visiting patients on the floor taught me two things really clearly.

First, it taught me what it means that to be healthy is more complicated than we often say. That being healthy is often a moving goalpost, depending on a whole variety of factors.

During our series on self-care, I mentioned being influenced by the work of Sonia Renee Taylor. I'll mention her twice in this sermon. Her work on embodiment. And she sums up that first lesson really, really well.

[2 : 21] As she discusses the ways in which our culture hides its desire to exclude some kinds of bodies behind concerns about good health. She writes this.

Health is not a state we owe the world. We are not less valuable, worthy, or lovable because we are not healthy. There is no standard of health that is achievable for all bodies.

I believe that there should be anchors, a systemic oppression of ableism, and reinforces the notion that people with illnesses and disabilities have defective bodies rather than different bodies.

Each of us will have varying degrees of health and wellness throughout our lives. And our arbitrary demands and expectations as they relate to health and size of people's bodies fuels inequality and injustice.

The second thing that I learned while doing CPE at NIH was far less rooted in kind of a reasoned thinking or reasoned conclusion about our culture and its obsession with health.

[3 : 32] It was instead a lesson that I learned from the way that my body felt every single day when I drove my car off of that campus. I would feel relief and sometimes confusion.

But below all of that was this nagging shock at the way the world of my patients was so disconnected from the world I was driving into. It wasn't just disconnected either.

It was actually hidden away. A world not talked about unless you had the misfortune of forced contact. It reminded me that we are far too comfortable with whatever doesn't conform to our standard of a good body, of good health, and of a good life.

We're far too comfortable with hiding that experience away. That's why we don't even know that 25%, as Dr. Amy Kinney said, that 25% of us are disabled.

Because we have been taught to keep the disabilities of our bodies, of our minds, of our siblings, of our friends, to ourselves. To eliminate disabilities from our social spaces and from our social

imagination.

[4 : 48] Yet that is not the way it is to be among disciples of Jesus. Now, we all know that this year has been challenging.

The political and economic train has, it's out of, unpredictable and out of control in ways that many of us have never known before in our lifetimes, honestly.

And so we've spent some time this year rooting ourselves in Jesus. We've spent some time talking about self-care. And now, in this Easter time, we've turned toward considering what it means to take care of the needs of others who are at risk in this time.

We're looking at what it is to care for ourselves if we're disabled and to care for others if we're non-disabled. See, we have a president who regularly talks about good genes and bad genes and talks about, like, worry over bloodlines.

Giving this kind of eugenicist thought fresh air. In March, the government withdrew 11 pieces of guidance related to the American with Disabilities Act in order to remove obstacles to businesses basically making more money.

[6 : 08] And yet, that's not the way it is to be among disciples of Jesus. We are not to reject God's way of hospitality and radical welcome for the sake of money and taking the easy way out.

A pastor that I sometimes enjoy, Pastor Rich Valotis, has put it well in something that I think about a lot.

He says, A different kind of power, different pace, and different priorities.

I am convinced that those priorities, the priorities of the church, have far too little talked about resisting ableism.

And since this is our very last sermon in the series, I want to make sure that we walk away with a clear definition of ableism. So here's a couple.

[7 : 24] Dr. Kinney, who opened the series, this is how she simply describes it. Ableism is the belief that disabled people are less valuable or less human than our disabled counterparts.

For something a bit more meaty, she points to black, queer, disabled, non-binary writer Talia A. Lewis. And they say that ableism is a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on socially constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness.

These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systematic oppression leads to people in society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth, or living place, health, wellness, and or their ability to satisfactorily reproduce, excel, and behave.

You do not, she says, have to be disabled to experience, they say, to experience ableism. And then finally, Dr. Lamar Hardwick in How Ableism Feels Racism adds this to round up these definitions. Ableism perpetuates the view that disabled bodies need repair or supervision. It assumes incompetence regardless of the type or scope of disability. Ableism is the ranking of bodies, but it isn't merely the ranking of which bodies matter most.

[8 : 58] It is also ranking the bodies with the intention of holding the power to interpret the behavior and intentions of bodies deemed deficient or disabled. Ableism assumes the power to define which bodies are best and which behaviors are normal or dangerous.

Now, I know that that is a lot to absorb. But as we turn to looking at Luke 14 that you just discussed, I want to lift those up because I think for some of us, part of walking out of this series is simply to take those definitions and sit with them.

Pray with them. Consider the ways in which wherever we fall, whether we're disabled or non-disabled, like the ways in which those things have become internalized and sit with Jesus in the midst of them.

So that might be you. That might be your simple step as we leave the series to hear what the Spirit is saying to your heart. Okay. Okay. So let's turn really briefly to Luke 14.

So you read this in your groups, and I just want to point a couple of things out about it. So Luke 14. So first of all, I'll just say right at the outset, I was tempted to do something where I asked for like, I'm not going to do this, but like a show of hands to see like how many people had ever connected this with disability before.

[10 : 24] Like I've read this passage a lot, and usually disability becomes like a metaphor in it. Yeah. I honestly hadn't thought about this.

And I feel the same is true when you think about people like Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Samson and Mephibosheth and all these people that are mentioned in the prophets even as having seats at the banquet table.

We tend to make those folks metaphors as opposed to real people. So in this first of, in the first few verses of the story, the first thing that happens is that we are told that Jesus goes into the house of a leading Pharisee to eat with others on the Sabbath.

Being Jesus and being, you know, all about controversy, he decides to heal somebody on the Sabbath. And he then starts to kind of hold forth to his dinner companions. And he does that by addressing two groups.

He starts by addressing the guests and saying, you know, I noticed that you sit, you know, you've chosen the places at the table because dinners were a social ceremony. Banquets were a social ceremony.

[11:30] Essentially, you've chosen the place that the places that will that, you know, will make you seem the most honored in this society. But he tells them, following the advice of Proverbs, that that's folly.

That really what they should do is choose the lowest place. Jesus advises those present to always seek the lowest place. And what's interesting is that in Proverbs, the advice is more about moving down kind of one place as a way to play the game.

But Jesus has none of that. Jesus is like, no, you go to the lowest place. And then you will be exalted. And then Jesus gives advice to the host and essentially says, when you throw a party, don't invite your family or your friends or your associates.

Invite people who cannot reciprocate. And do that intentionally. Particularly the poor and the disabled. And then there's this person in the text who kind of pipes up and says, after Jesus finishes speaking, blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of heaven.

And y'all know this kind of person. This is the kind of person that's like basically trying to get in good with the teacher, even though they don't actually get the lesson. It's the kind of person who's like, this is what we would say.

[12:52] They're all up in the Kool-Aid, but they don't know what flavor it is. So this person in some way connects what Jesus is saying to the kingdom of God, the banquet of new creation, but really doesn't get it. And then Jesus gives this other parable and basically says, you know, makes this one a practical lesson, but also is talking about new creation.

And basically says there's a person giving a banquet. He has all these RSVPs. And then when the time comes for the people to actually come in, the food is ready.

They didn't have clocks, so it was like a double RSVP. You had to then go back out and be like, it's ready, now you can come. So when he goes back out, people make these thinly veiled excuses for why they can't come, revealing their true priorities.

So the man says, you know what? He tells his servant, go and center the margins. Invite the folks who are poor and disabled. Go outside the wall of the city to basically the back alleys and invite those people in so that my house might be full.

And I wonder what accommodations had to be made to achieve that dream. And I wonder what accommodations each of us is invited to embrace out of the dream of our radically welcoming God.

[14:14] So as we close this series and I close this sermon, I just want to lift up three things to kind of distill what we've been saying for the last four weeks.

I think Luke does this well. So first, the disabled people who come to the banquet are invited just as they are. We are to welcome folks among us with all the markers that are fundamental to their identity.

And we can expect in some way that at the new creation, we will continue to bear some markers of our identity that are fundamental. Scripture speaks of Jesus as the first fruits of creation.

And so when you think about how Jesus appears with nail marks in his hands, these scars that don't disappear, they're not erased or eliminated.

We can think forward about what that might mean about the continuity of our own bodies. Now, when I try to apprehend that, I think a lot about that, you know, honestly, in the new creation, I would like to be black and queer and gender nonconforming.

[15:32] And that is partly because I know that the quality of life that is heaven, that I can only truly experience it if I am fully embraced as who I am there.

By something I've never experienced here. That is going to be paradise for me. That will be true healing. That is going to be true healing.

If we are not to encourage folks who are to take up space. Because there is plenty good room as the black tradition reminds us. Plenty good room. Again, I want to go to Sonya Renee Taylor.

She says something about this. When she heard a person, she listened to a podcast in which a woman was reflecting on how she has multiple sclerosis.

And she felt like she could not ever use, you know, mobility aids. Or she felt like ashamed when she did. And here's what she says. Sonya Renee Taylor. Some of us have no problems taking up space.

[17:04] Google, manspreading. While others move closer to invisibility daily. I long, she says, for a mutiny of space.

May there be 10 million wheelchairs, canes, service dogs, and mobility aids on every street in our city, in our country.

That there be double seats for fat bodies. May every boardroom and decision-making entity be brimming with young and old, black and brown and transgender bodies. That's what radical love is. That's what radical love is. And then finally, the host in the story tells his servant to compel the poor and the disabled to come in.

So the house may be full. God's dream is that the house be full. And the house being full, in this passage, is contingent on who's there.

[17:59] And it's not the center. What will it mean for us to zealously extend invitations? What will it mean for us to become, as Claire, some of y'all know Claire, suggested that we become table setters?

I love that phrase. At the table, what will it mean for us to become table setters? Because somebody had to set the table, and somebody had to go and invite. Somebody had to think about the preparation and accommodations that would be needed.

If you are disabled in this room or you're watching, may you know that you are an honored guest. And whether disabled or non-disabled, may we all shift our concern from whether we will be invited to the banquet to whom we will invite to the banquet.

I think one of the most interesting parts of this story, and here's where I'm going to end, is the first few, maybe five or six verses, because the only healing that occurs in this story is in those verses. And it's really interesting that the disease name there is generalized edema. And again, I don't want to stray too far into the world of the metaphorical.

[19:32] But in the ancient Mediterranean, the head disease, when people wrote about it, scholars wrote about it, it often actually was a euphemism for basically folks who were swollen with their own greed.

It was used as a critique of people who had insatiable thirst for prestige and status and honor. The only person healed in the story is that person.

The person who is prioritizing material security and ease and playing the game of the world. May we as a church be healed from our ableist fantasies, which rank some of greater value than others.

And may we instead be delivered into God's dream of a full house with disabled folks, given the best seats. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.