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“Please consider me excused” (Luke 14:17).

Growing up in the 1950s, we were expected to say “Please” and “Thank you” and to ask to leave the table after supper with “May I be excused?” Lest you think that my six siblings and I were raised at Downton Abbey, I defend the protocols by explaining that my loving parents had survived the Great Depression and insisted that good manners were a matter of dignity and also a way to impress adults in school and when pursuing employment.

In today’s Gospel parable, the guests to a great dinner also asked to be excused, but in a very impolite way. They did not RSVP until the day of the feast, then told the servants dispatched to remind them that they had better things to do. The hall had been decorated, the food cooked and the table set, the orchestra was tuning up and the host and hostess were dressed and at the door to greet their honored guests, who were all no-shows.

What does the host do? Typical of Jesus’ radical approach to dining, he sends the servants out into the streets and alleys, then to the highways and hedgerows to herd in enough guests to fill the banquet hall. Spited by the original guests, he spites them back by opening his house to the “poor, the crippled, blind and lame,” and when there are still places, he buttonholes foreigners and strangers.

As an allegory of the expanding Kingdom of God rejected by Israel and then opened to Gentiles, this parable explained the early church’s rejection by Mother Jerusalem, sending it into the Graeco-Roman world. Yet the original parable appears more like a warning from Jesus to his audience not to miss God’s invitation to the eternal

banquet for lesser earthly or material concerns like real estate and oxen, or even getting married. All these were passing away, after all, compared to eternity.

The story is revved up with details, an angry host who rounds up the town beggars and then strong arms travelers to his table to fill the hall. He has been slighted by his rich friends and is striking back. They won't as much as taste his dishes. This bears little resemblance to the merciful Father Jesus presents in so many of his parables. The scene is so severe it borders comedy, a Marx Brothers film with Groucho directing traffic, stopping to taste the food, wisecracking with startled newcomers.

If original, was this Jesus' way of telling an entertaining story with an important message, caricaturing both God and the thoughtless guests to bring home the folly of missing salvation for a bigger farm? We are encouraged to sort among the layers of the text, the evangelist's purpose, the editor's redactions to apply to subsequent current events.

But the message remains. Don't miss the invitation to be in God's gracious company, to dine with the saints, to taste and see the goodness of the Lord. Say yes. Be there. No excuses.

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