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Have you ever been that person in the story who passed up an opportunity because you had something better to do? Didn't realize what was knocking on the door and just waved it away?

I've done it a lot in my life. One time a number of years ago when I was still working at summer camp, I was holed up in the office on a Saturday after the campers had gone home, toiling away getting ahead of the workload for the week to come. A couple of my coworkers poked their heads in and said a bunch of them were going to drive down to a swimming hole on the river for a couple of hours, and asked if I wanted to come. I told them to have a good time, but I waved them off because I was in the middle of something "important."

I spent the next few hours typing, filling out spreadsheets, coordinating itineraries, filing health forms, all *kinds* of thrilling stuff. And eventually, I took a couple of minutes to refill my water bottle and check Facebook. And there I saw one of my friends had posted pictures from the swimming hole. I scrolled through shot after shot of them jumping off of rocky cliffs to the deep, cool water below, splashing each other, laughing and pushing and diving... Every picture was all smiles. And *then*, the *worst* of all... they went and got *ice cream*. You could *taste* the flavors popping out of those pictures.

When they all came pouring out of the camp van a little while later I could hear them laughing and roughhousing... and I knew I had missed a great day. Problem was... when they had asked me to come along... I didn't know what I was missing out on by saying no.

That's what we're dealing with in this parable that Jesus is telling. He tells a story of a noble or a lord of some repute who decides to host a big feast. A real blowout, all the fixings. He makes up a guest list and sends a servant to go invite everyone. And he's a lord, so in those days he's inviting all the other fancy people in their gated communities, because those are the only people *fit* to eat at a lord's table. But again and again, every person the servant goes to

has something better to do. Something *important*. The first one had *just* bought a piece of land, and *had* to go out and survey it. Another had *just* bought a bunch of oxen, and was planning on trying them out. The third one blames his wife. “I have just been married, and... therefore I cannot come.”

Everyone invited is busy or distracted. They’ve got a lot on their plate and this dinner invitation isn’t a priority.

And so the noble says, “You know what? Fine. We don’t need them anyway. Go out into the streets and find the poor, the blind, and the disabled. There are more than enough seats at the table for all of them. And once you’re done with that, just go find anyone. Everyone you come across—alleys and gutters—let them know they’re welcome at my table. I want my house filled, because I can’t eat this all myself.”

In case it isn’t obvious by now, in most of Jesus’ parables, if a noble or a master of some kind shows up in the story, it’s *usually* to reveal something to us about God. About how God thinks—how God works. And in it, we can recognize something about our relation to God, good and bad, in situations throughout our lives.

In this parable, there are a few groups of characters. There’s the noble who set the feast, there’s the servant who goes out and does the inviting, there’s the people who ignore the invite because they’ve got other priorities, and there’s this huge swath of people that actually get to eat at the master’s table. People with problems and your average Joes on the street.

Where do we fall in the story at any given moment? Are we the people who say yes to the invitation, or are we the people who have too much other stuff on our minds? On any given day, are we listening for the sound of God scratching on our door, or poking us in the arm, trying to get our attention? How many times have we missed something God was trying to show us, or some opportunity God was trying to lay at our door? How many times have we ignored God’s invitation because we were busy doing something else? Because we didn’t know what we were missing?

Life is so full of *stuff*. Stuff that’s so important. Land and oxen and spreadsheets. And who’s in *charge* of deciding what’s important to us, huh? It’s us, right? We’re the ones that say *this* is what’s important to me, *this* is what I need to focus on right now, *this* is what matters.

The exercise of a life of faith is to let go a little on the death-grip we have on our priorities, and let God show us what's really important. And I'm not saying we try to *decide* what we think God thinks is important. That's how you start a religion, and nobody wants that.

I'm saying we *open* ourselves to the reality: that God has been trying to show us what's important every day of our lives. God's had servants knocking on the doors of our mind and our hearts every day of our lives, with a monogrammed invite on fancy pink stationery, just *waiting* for us to take our earplugs out and *listen* for it. To come check out the feast God's laid out for us if we could just come take a look.

What we learn about God from this parable is that God's table, God's feast of blessings, is available to all; that God is inviting everyone—the poor, the disabled, the oppressed, the people on the streets and the rich landowners alike. That God is actively reaching out, because God has set the table and by God *somebody* better eat all this good food before it gets cold!

And what we learn about *ourselves* is that sometimes we miss God's invitation. We don't know what we're missing, and we've got blinders on that keep us from seeing it—whatever *it* is God's trying to show us at any given moment—and we should try harder every day to open our eyes and the ears of our hearts to perceive the different invitations God throws at us. Don't be like me holed up in the office that day... because you don't know when God's next party will end with ice cream.

Now today we read the version of this parable as it's recorded in the Gospel of Luke. This same story was also in the Gospel of Matthew, but it had some slight variations—partly because both Gospels were put together a couple decades *after* Jesus' told it in the first place, and partly because Matthew framed it a little differently to make a point. I say this because in Matthew it's very obvious who the servant in the story is supposed to represent. In *Matthew's* version of Jesus' parable, not only do the people who got the first invite say *no* to it, but they also beat and *kill* the servant, laughing all the way.

The way Matthew understood the parable, the servant was supposed to represent Jesus, who went into the city inviting people to His master's

banquet, and instead of joining Him, they mocked Him, beat Him, and killed Him. Matthew even added his own epilogue to the parable, which said that not only do you have to *accept* the invitation, but you have to make yourself *ready* for it to *come*—even when you have no reason to *expect* it—or it won't do you any *good*.

But that's another story for another sermon. I think the *contrast* between Matthew and Luke's accounts shows us *another* lesson. A next step, if you will, for those times when we actually *do* open our ears enough to catch God's invitations.

I don't think the servant in *Luke's* version of this parable was Jesus at all. It doesn't have *any* of the Jesus imagery that Matthew does.

Just like sometimes we can be the one who misses the invitation, and sometimes we can be the one who accepts it... I think sometimes we can be the servant character too!

Because sometimes we *do* hear God's invitation, and sometimes we *do* come and eat at God's table and sit and laugh and break bread with all the other guests. And sometimes we notice the empty seats, don't we? I'm not talking about church pews; I'm talking about all the times that we feel God's blessings, that we enjoy God's presence... and we realize that... some people aren't. That just like us sometimes people are suffering, or blinded, or distracted, or too busy trying to make ends meet. That there are people out there who haven't heard or seen God's invitation to whichever feast it is you're at, and that they deserve to enjoy whatever it is as much as you do!

And so we become the servants in the story. There are moments that we know what *we* were missing. Whether it's community, or fulfillment, or adventure, or peace, or the Spirit of God in the wind and the warmth of God in the sunlight. Whether it's joy or hope or just something *new*. Whatever it was that God was inviting us to discover in that specific moment... we know God is inviting others to it too.

God's got a whole *mountain* of invitations, for a whole *lot* of different banquets, and a *lot* of people to get them to. Who's gonna grab a stack?