

Return to the Banquet Table

The Theme of Table Fellowship in Luke - Acts

Asian American National Staff Conference, March 2004

Introduction: Welcome Home!

I have the great privilege of introducing dinner and our program tonight. Even more, I have the honor of explaining the vision behind this conference. So I'm going to teach a little and contextualize our experience so far - why we have feasted on our history and some of our stories. I've asked some of you how it's been so far, and one word that some of you have used is "nourished." I feel nourished. This conference is titled Return to the Banquet Table. In many ways, this is a theme we can really get into. For example, I really like to eat. This Sunday, my mom is going to meet me after the conference (because I grew up 30 minutes away from here). And because I live in Boston now, my mom and I enjoy the times we have to spend face to face. I know she'll want to take me out to a Japanese restaurant, where they'll have a boat full of sushi, the freshest kind that melts in your mouth. They'll have good teriyaki and tempura. A banquet table. For many of us, the language of love our parents use is food. "Welcome home! Here, let's eat!" And if you can imagine a banquet table filled with all the foods you love to eat, that is an expression of paradise. Well, God uses that language of love, too. "Welcome home! Here, let's eat!"

The Scripture Story

What we're going to do now is to walk through the story of Scripture using the lens of the banquet. I'm going to start with Genesis and end in Revelation. In the creation, in paradise, God set before humanity a banquet. He said, "Out of all the trees save one you may eat. Look at the fruit, the feast I've set before you. All this is yours. Eat with me in your home, in paradise, for this is where you belong." Thus began a theme, that of eating with God, or eating in God's presence, which was an expression of being home, being in the paradise. But then Adam and Eve sinned and were exiled out of the land of the garden. They could no longer eat with God in the same way. And God began again with Israel.

When He brought Israel out of Egypt, He called the leaders of Israel up to the top of a mountain. And in Exodus 24, they "saw God, and ate and drank in His presence." Why? Because God was leading Israel into a new garden land, a new paradise, flowing with milk and honey. Israel was God's true humanity, and God was giving them what the original humanity had lost. They enjoyed the blessing of creation restored in some sense. King David said in Psalm 23, "You set a table before me." But then Israel sinned and were exiled out of the garden land, just like Adam and Eve before them.

What then? God promised to bring His people back to the banquet table. But more than just Israel - God would somehow act to bring the whole world back to the banquet table. Isaiah says in Isa.25:6, "On this mountain, the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines." And again in Isaiah 55:1 - 2, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost...and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."

And then Jesus fulfilled the theme. He told a story, for example, of a homecoming banquet. A lost child returns home. "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and now is found." (Lk.15:22-24) He has come home. And when you come home, you eat. So God throws us a banquet. "Welcome home! Here, let's eat!"

So what does this have to do with our conference? In many ways this conference is meant to celebrate Asian Americans coming home in Jesus. We have tasted his banquet. The students we know who have decided to come home in and through Jesus - they have tasted his banquet.

What's more, this banquet table is big. Yesterday, Russell brought us through about 2,000 years of vital stories. Stories about us, which impact us. In fact, the reason why we were excited to have Russell come share with us is so that we might feast at a larger banquet table. We are returning to the banquet table of our own past, an underemphasized history, a history that is intentionally marginalized by many universities today so that they can continue to set Christianity up as a white man's religion so they can knock it down like a strawman. But because of

what I know now, I can tell my non-Christian parents that I am not selling out to a white man's religion. Jesus has been a part of Asian history. And what's more, I can invite you, Mom and Dad, to return to the banquet table. We as staff can invite Asian Americans, Asian internationals, and even Asians in Asia to return to the banquet table.

When you sit at a banquet table, what do you think of? What are words that come to mind? First of all, it's a communal experience. It's not individual. Second, it's most likely meant to be family in some way. There are close bonds being either made or demonstrated. Third, it's intimate. Things are shared at the table. Fourth, it's a celebration. There is some great occasion for this great spread. You can already start to see how powerful this image of the banquet table is.

But I don't want to reason just from our cultural experience with food, I want us to reason from Scripture and look for ways that Jesus will take our culture and expand it, tweak it, or transform it, to be a blessing to others.

Scripture: Luke - Acts

To do that, I'm going to trace the theme of the banquet table through Luke and Acts. We're going to see how Jesus taught about the banquet table, and then how the early Christians in Acts took his teaching and lived it out. There are 10 meal scenes in Luke's Gospel and a few more in Acts. I'm going to summarize them.

Opportunity for Outreach & Compassion First of all, the banquet table is an opportunity for outreach and compassion. Jesus invited people to the banquet table in the first two meal scenes. The first incident of a banquet table is in Luke 5. Jesus calls his disciples, and when he calls Levi the tax collector, Levi throws a big feast, a reception, a banquet. And Jesus goes and eats with all these other tax collectors and sinners. In other words, a banquet is an evangelistic opportunity. The Pharisees at the time had a real problem with this because they felt that eating demonstrated your separateness. Jesus made eating an opportunity for outreach and compassion.

This is also the main issue in the next eating scene, Luke 7. "One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him. And he went to the Pharisee's house and sat down to eat." But then a sinful woman comes along and honors Jesus as a guest. She washes his feet with her tears and her hair. Jesus says to the Pharisee, "You have not been a true host. She is the true host. And here's where the real party is going on. I welcome this woman to the table even though you didn't." Once again, eating is an opportunity for outreach and compassion.

Right away, this challenges some cultural taboos that my family had. When I was a child, my parents didn't have certain people over to our house because they really thought these certain other people were beneath them. It was a subtle thing. They didn't talk about it a lot. But looking back, I can tell. We didn't want to share our lives with them. We didn't want to get into reciprocation, like "Oh, now we'd have to go over to their house, and we don't want to do that."

But in Luke 14, Jesus is eating with the Pharisees again, and he destroys the law of reciprocation. Verses 12 - 14: "When one of you gives a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Those were the categories of people in Judaism who were thought to be cursed. Maybe they sinned more than others, so they were being punished. So they're not just inconvenient; they've got a stigma. It's as if Jesus would say to us today, "When one of you gives a feast, invite the AIDS victims, the gay community, the convicts, those whom your ethnic group stigmatizes."

Jesus cares about how we party. Why? Because bad parties paint bad pictures of the kingdom banquet. Good parties, inclusive ones, parties where sinners are invited, are good pictures of the kingdom banquet. The banquet table is not a place to demonstrate your exclusiveness. It is a place to demonstrate God's inclusiveness, God's invitation.

Internalizing Jesus' Word Then we start to get into a second meaning, a symbolic meaning. Eating at Jesus' banquet table symbolized feeding on his teaching and internalizing it. In reality, if you ate with Jesus, you were probably hearing him teach because he used meal times as teaching times. But in symbolism, if you wanted true fellowship with Jesus, you had to internalize his teaching. In Luke 9, Jesus sends out the 12 apostles on a short term missions trip to Israel. They come back and Jesus gives them a symbolic picture of what they just did. He feeds the five thousand through the 12 apostles, leaving 12 baskets, which symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel. It's a physical picture

of a spiritual reality, that they were going out and feeding Jesus' teaching to Israel. The same thing happens with Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Mary sits at Jesus' feet to hear his word, to feast on his word.

New Community This episode leads us to our third point: The banquet table symbolizes Jesus' new community. When Mary takes a position among the male disciples at Jesus' feet instead of not helping her sister Martha, she breaks the traditional little sister role. Martha tries to exert her big sister authority over Mary but Jesus says, "No." Jesus was communicating that he was forming a new community, with him at its head. When we come to his banquet table, his authority takes precedence over anyone else's, because it's his community forming there. In Acts 2 and 4 and 6, the early Christians ate together often to express their family solidarity with each other. They were a new community, so they ate together.

Generosity & Redistribution Fourth, if the banquet table is a place to demonstrate new community, it's a place to redistribute wealth to those who have less. It is as if Jesus is saying that all his people sit at one large unseen banquet table. And because of that, when someone asks, "Can you please pass the bread," we do it. The food belongs to him, because he is the host. We are all guests at his table. So it does not make sense for us to hoard our food. The food was meant to be distributed around the table. In Luke 11, over a lunch with the Pharisees, Jesus blasts them and says that inwardly they are full of greed, and that they have neglected justice and the love of God. Again in Luke 14, Jesus says invite and give to the poor and those who cannot repay you. Clearly the early church in Acts 2 and 4 understood this, because they practiced redistribution of wealth, especially so that no one would go hungry.

My wife and I have learned a little bit of this since last year. When we moved in in 2000, we invited our next door neighbor Nick over. He was 16. He is a 6'6" young Jamaican man. Back then, we invited him to our table as outreach. But he really didn't want relationship with us. A few months later, he went to juvie lock-up for the second time. The next year, he got kicked off the basketball team for using drugs. But last year, he committed his life to Christ. He started going to a church and he really wanted to turn his life around. He finished high school and is now a freshman at Roxbury Community College. During last summer, he came to me and asked me if I had room in my house for him to move in. So he was coming to me as a believer in Christ, in the family of God, asking me to help. "Can you pass the bread?" And there was a part of us that said, "Lord, no! We think he was involved with a break-in theft in our house a few years ago." But the Lord challenged us, "Why don't you set a place at your table for him?" So he's now living with us, and it's been a blessing for us.

As an IV staff, this table image challenges me about the redistribution of fundraised money. For example, as an Area Director in Boston, I would love to hire a woman I know who is currently a youth pastor, raised in Vietnam, biracial Vietnamese and African American, the daughter of a GI. She has an amazing testimony. She can reach tons more people than any of us currently on staff in Boston. But how would she fundraise? She's not quickly accepted in either community. So if she feels led to come on staff, I would need to fundraise among new donors. That's the only way she could come on staff, that's the only way some of the work can go forward. I as an Area Director of East Asian descent, who is connected to more wealth, I need to take the redistribution aspect of the table seriously.

Now maybe not everyone has the opportunity to do this. But in principle, it's the kind of thing the Lord wants to do through you, or through our students: a type of redistribution of wealth because we sit at the banquet table together.

Reconciliation The fifth point builds on the others. The banquet table is a place to practice community and reconciliation with others. Jesus touches on this in Luke 14. But it's really in Luke 19 that he demonstrates this. Jesus goes to meet Zaccheus, the chief tax-collector, the guy who pimped his own Jewish community by not only working for the Romans but skimming off the top of the tax collecting pyramid. Zaccheus needs to be seriously reconciled to his people through Jesus. Jesus says that he wants to go to Zaccheus' house and eat with him. Then Zaccheus gives up half his wealth to the poor right off the bat. Then he gives back in reparations four times the amount he defrauded anyone of. In other words, he cares about reconciliation. In order to come to the table, you've got to be willing to reconcile with those already at the table, and those who will come later to the table.

The table later becomes the dominant social image and social expression of the New Testament church. In Acts 6, which Jess is going to lead us through after dinner, we'll look at when cultural and intra-ethnic tensions start to pull the table fellowship apart. And in Galatians 2, the issue is table fellowship again, but there the issue is racial. At those times, God's Spirit insists on reconciliation at the table. I think we experienced some of that this morning, as

we shared our stories. In some ways, the door was opened to a larger conversation. But the process of reconciliation was beginning or continuing as the case may be. That is what happens at the table.

If we are looking for an image that will help people understand why reconciliation is intrinsic to the gospel, and not an extracurricular, the banquet table is really helpful. To eat together with others, you've got to be okay with them. This is one of the ways Jesus' table is attractive and yet challenging.

Community Celebration Sixth, the banquet table is a place to celebrate people being saved. In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables of lost things being found: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. In each case, whenever the lost thing is found, there is a celebration with a feast. It's a banquet table again. It's joyful. It's communal. Jesus' point is that the whole community gets involved and celebrates with him and with God. People are being saved. So we celebrate conversions with meals.

This is an easy point of connection to many cultures, and Asian cultures are no exception. I've seen our students celebrate spiritual birthdays. It's really significant, I think. This day commemorates the day I was born, a second time, into a second family, a spiritual family.

Internalizing His Death and Resurrection The seventh point is a symbolic point. Jesus uses communion at the banquet table to symbolize his death and resurrection. In Luke, meal scenes lie on either side of the cross and resurrection. Beforehand, it's the last supper. Afterwards, it's the Emmaus Road meal.

These two incidents are the centerpiece of Luke's theme of the table. All the other previous incidents are connected to these by literary techniques like repetition of words or motifs. In the middle of the Passover meal, Jesus took bread and broke it, saying, "This is my body." This is what would happen to my physical body on the cross - it'll be broken. "This is my blood, poured out." I want you to internalize my death.

Then on the other side of the resurrection, Jesus returns his people to paradise. He finds two of his disciples on the Emmaus Road, depressed and hopeless. They don't recognize him. But he walks with them. He opens the Scriptures to them. Their hearts burn with fire as his teaching nourishes them again. They ask him to stay with them and have a meal. He breaks bread. Then their eyes were opened. They recognize him, and he vanishes.

When have we heard that phrase before, "Then their eyes were opened?" At the fall. But everything happens in reverse. You mean to say that you have two walking with the Lord, just like Adam and Eve walked with the Lord. Their eyes are opened in the context of a meal. The exact words used in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve's eyes are opened in the context of a meal. But everything is happening in reverse. Instead of focusing on themselves, they focus on Jesus. Instead of disregarding God's word, they internalize Jesus' word. Instead of realizing that they're naked, they are clothed with power from on high - Luke's own words. And instead of spreading out from Eden to proclaim their own human dominion, they spread out from Jerusalem to proclaim Jesus' dominion, the dominion of the one truly human being. Jesus reverses the fall, and opens the door to a new paradise. Jesus said he would do this when he said on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise," Eden. I will let you eat with God again. "Welcome home. Let's eat!"

Communion was originally part of a meal. We won't be having communion together here, but the next time you do, picture it as part of a larger meal, a meal that has been building up to this point. When we eat the broken bread and drink the wine of communion as an aspect of the banquet table, it symbolizes internalizing Jesus' death. But the thing is: Jesus doesn't stay dead. Jesus comes alive, and he comes alive in us by his Spirit. So communion symbolizes Jesus' resurrection in us. He puts his resurrection life in us by his Spirit so that we are a new humanity spreading new life out over a dying creation. And when we eat, we are celebrating being able to eat with God again. "Welcome home. Let's eat!" When Jesus ate with sinners, he wasn't just saying, "I like you." He was saying, "I am returning you to paradise, if you can internalize my death and resurrection."

The Early Church How did the early church take Jesus' teaching? It's really easy to read Acts 2, 4, 6, 10, and 27 totally separate from Luke's Gospel. We read, "they ate together" and say, "Well, that's nice." But if we listen to all Jesus taught before, we sense all that was really going on. (see SLIDE)

Outreach: They invited others to this meal. They read Scripture together over the meal. They internalized the teaching just like they were internalizing the food. They fed the poor. They expressed their community life at that table. They celebrated Jesus' death and resurrection within them as they celebrated communion. When they did, they felt that they sensed Jesus' presence with them. And how could they not? Look at all the symbolism! Look at everything that the banquet table means. Even if it was a meager meal, they received it with joy because they saw in it something new. The kingdom banquet of Jesus, that is exceedingly abundantly more than any other banquet.

What strikes me as I have studied this is that out of all the symbols of our faith, the table is as important or almost important as the cross. I hope that you find it to be a helpful image or icon. Especially as we consider what it means to invite more and more people to the table, especially more of those who are not of East Asian descent. If we are commissioned to bring all Asian American students, not just some of them, to Jesus' table, what does that mean? We'll explore that as we go. Maybe it'll be hard for us in some ways. But maybe we've got at least a few things going for us. We have this image, which we can put to use as we eat with students, as we sit with them and teach. As we sit with them and say, this is a token of our true home. There are so many powerful lessons here. And we have each other as resources. As we will soon do over dinner, we'll sit at one table, so to speak. It's a symbol of our fellowship together and our mission.

Let me close by reading a poem. It's a modification of a poem by Emily Dickinson called *I Had Been Hungry All the Years*.

We had been hungry all the years
Our time had come to dine
We, trembling, drew the table near
And touched the curious wine

'T was this on tables we had seen
When turning, hungry, lone
We looked in windows for the wealth
We could not hope to own

We did not know the ample bread
'T was so unlike the crumb
We tasted again the milk and honey
That over our cups did run

The fruit of life once barred from us
Jesus has set again
Upon our plates, heaping full -
The glory of God's garden