

There is Another King: Jesus

Luke – Acts

Jesus' Vision for Table Fellowship: Guests

This Party Isn't For You

Luke 14:7 – 11

Introduction: What Kind of Party Do You Most Want To Be At?

What does it mean to love God and love the poor and love the world the way God loves it? Let me try to get at that using a non-traditional method. Let me ask you what kind of party do you most want to be at?

Party #1: A Victory Party

I remember when I was 10, I wanted a party to celebrate my achievements. I am the only son of an only son, and so I was carrying on the family name. I was doing well in school; my parents made sure of it. I remember in elementary school how my mom would sometimes do my homework for me! But they also got me involved in competitive swimming. And because that was a realm where I had to work hard, I really wanted to make my parents proud in that arena.

I recall one day, I was in swimming practice with the team. It was near the end of the practice, so I think my mom was already there to watch the tail end of it and then take me home. And my coach said, 'Ok, now we're going to do relays.' I loved relays, because they took up a lot of time and you only had to do one or two laps of it!! Then my coach said, 'We're doing butterfly relays.' And my heart sank, because I hated butterfly. It's that stroke where you lift your head up like this and I always swallowed water sometime during the lap. Our coach picked two team captains: my friend Jack and another kid I didn't really know that well. Now I was a little disappointed because I wasn't picked as a captain, but I figured if there was status in being a captain, maybe there was status in being picked first. I was ready, and I was excited, because Jack was my...friend. So I was sure that he would pick me first because he was my...friend, right? Well Jack didn't pick me first. He didn't pick me second. I was picked next to last, and the guy who was picked after me had breathing problems – so you know how I was feeling!

Well the relay started. Typically in swimming relays you put your fastest person last to be the anchor. My team decided to switch that and put me last. So by the time I was up, I had a pretty big lead over the other team. I dove into the pool. I didn't take one breath – I didn't want to lift my head and choke. So I didn't see until the end that the guy next to me had actually caught up to me and just beat me to the wall. I looked up from the side of the pool, and saw that the opposite team was cheering, and some were cheering me! They were having their own little party! My teammates, though, were disappointed with me. We would have to pull out the lane lines and cover the pool. I didn't even want to look over at my mom. I began to discover what it all meant. What did it all mean? What did I learn from this? It meant that friendship didn't mean a thing. Friendship didn't mean a thing, and it didn't, did it? The fact that Jack was my friend didn't mean a thing. And I learned that other peoples' success is based on my failure. And conversely, that my success is based on other peoples' failure. So I went through much of my younger life hoping that other people would fail more frequently than me.

In many ways, I actually won the approval I was looking for from my parents. Being reserved, they didn't show it a whole lot, but I could tell. I noticed that the trophies in my bedroom were never dusty! Mom always kept them clean. They were as much hers as they were mine. I remember my mom telling her sisters in Japan, 'Oh yes, Mako is doing well in swimming...He's going to the Junior Olympics this year.' I felt like that party would one day come. But then there was one time when I didn't do well at one particular swim competition. I was really frustrated with myself. I mean, I took these things seriously; I was getting up at 4:30am almost every morning. I remember my parents driving me and my sister home. My Mom turned around and said to me, 'Mako, do you know how much we're paying to keep you swimming?' Now, I was already mad. But they made it seem like they cared more about this than I did. I didn't know what to say. There was some other tension that had been building between me and my parents but I thought they had nothing on me, until that point. This conversation crystallized some things. From

that point on, I constantly felt the irony of our relationship. Because I could do what they wanted. I could get them to throw me a party. But inside, I was FUMING.

Party #2: A Celebrity Party

You can want your parents to throw you a victory party. Or, you can want your friends to throw you a celebrity party, or see you as the life of the party. I launched into this strategy, too. I know it might be hard for you to believe now, but in elementary school, I was the tallest boy in my class. It was amazing. You know what that meant for me? I could hit the tetherball higher than other people. And you know who my hero was? Fonzie on the TV show Happy Days. Fonzie was this James Dean-like guy who wore jeans, a t-shirt, and a leather jacket. All the girls liked him, but just as important to me was the fact that everyone respected him. More than anything, I wanted to be respected. I thought, 'Maybe if I just act like Fonzie, I'll be respected, too!' My parents weren't about to buy me a leather jacket at age 9, but can you imagine me, this little Asian kid with the thumbs-up sign? You laugh, but do we not do this? Do we not imitate those who have gone before us who are respected? And you know, the funny thing is, it often works! Somehow, everyday at lunch, all the other boys knew that I sat on the edge of the bench. That was my seat.

And then, it started happening. Not only did everyone else get taller, but I got pimples. It was a real bummer. I would wake up in the morning and dread looking in the mirror. How many new pimples this morning? My mom would try to be helpful, and say, 'See Mako, you have to wash your face at night.' I would say, 'Mom, I swim in chlorinated water everyday. If that doesn't clean my skin out, not to mention dry it out completely, I don't know what will!' So I would go to school, just trying to forget about my dilemma. But I could tell when my friends would kind of look at my forehead. And then I knew I could never really be Fonzie, not only because I wasn't Italian, but because I had acne. I felt sorry for this girl named Melody, largely because I had a shy, quiet crush on her all throughout elementary school. When she got chicken pox in second grade, she came back with a chicken pox scar on her nose, and the rest of us called her 'crater-face' all through elementary school. Then I got to high school. I remember wishing I were more handsome, wishing my face looked a little different.

You can be the person other people want you to be, but our society is really hard on girls in this way, isn't it? Not only do you have to be fun and smart; you have to look a certain way. And it only gets tougher as we all got older. I'm especially sensitive to this now that I've become a father of a little girl. Have you seen the ads on television? Like the Pantene commercial, where a woman just whips her head around and her hair falls magically into place. And she says, 'Don't hate me because I'm beautiful.' As if you, too, by just buying Pantene can be the woman men want and women want to be. When I was a teenager – you're probably too young to remember this – there was an ad on television. It was for Cross Your Heart bras. The ad goes like this: A man is waiting for the elevator. The elevator doors open. An old girlfriend steps off the elevator to walk her dog. Then he looks at her breasts, as if there's nothing better to look at! And he says, 'Jane! Is that really you?' And she says, 'Cross my heart.' For Cross My Heart bras. They do not do that kind of thing to guys. I mean can you imagine a woman waiting for the elevator. The doors open and an old boyfriend walks out. She looks at his crotch and says, 'John! Is that really you?' Then he says, 'Cross my jockey strap,' or something! For girls, your appearance so easily becomes your identity. By the way, it may interest you to know that a number of years ago, the rate of suicide for women over the age of 35 was 6 times higher than it was for men over the age of 35. The rate of emotional breakdown and institutionalization was 11 times higher for women over the age of 35 than it was for men over the age of 35. Why? Because when you place your identity in looking young and attractive, then when you no longer look that way, what happens to you?

Well I decided that if I couldn't be the best looking, I'd try to be best at something. When I was in 9th grade, I was the captain of the Varsity water polo and swimming teams. Our high school was a small school, so it wasn't that big of a deal on the grand scale of things, but inside the school, it meant a lot! I got respect! Not to mention invitations to some choice parties. My friends were all the scholar-athlete types. There were these homeroom announcements when someone said over the PA system, 'Yesterday our team beat so and so, and Mako Nagasawa scored such and such.' And I could just feel the eyes turn and look at me. And I felt filled with something. But in another minute, it was gone, and I felt empty again.

I was trying to be the person people liked and respected, and I was moderately successful, but I wasn't sure I liked who I was becoming because it started a pattern. I became aware – slowly – of how self-centered I was. (1) I didn't like a system where my success was built on someone else's failure. I noticed that I was becoming a bit cruel in my attitude towards people. Another thing happened. (2) When I was a sophomore in high school, my parents started their arguing about getting a divorce. Their relationship had always been full of some kind of fighting but this time things were really heated. It was hard for me to talk about this. Early on during that time, during a lunch period, I sat with my biology teacher, Miss Schultz, who was a very empathetic and caring person, and that's what I needed. I told her a few things about what had been happening. And she just listened really well and let me talk. Then I added stuff about how it had been hard trying to focus on school and swimming through all this. And she said something like, 'Wow, it must be hard, and I really respect you for holding it together.' It was the encouragement I had been fishing for. And as I walked out of the classroom, I had to ask myself, 'Why did I say that?' And I heard a still small voice say, 'Because you're capable of taking any situation, however hard, and using it to your advantage.' That was the pattern I developed. Now before I go into that more, let me chart out a third option.

Party #3: Your Own Little Parties

You can live for a victory party. You can live for a celebrity party. Or, you can try to throw yourself little parties. I tried to do this when I went to college. Many of you look forward to going to college to go to parties for yourself. Because what you're doing in those parties is you are reinventing yourself. How many of you look forward to getting your braces off? Maybe you'll wear a retainer at night, but no one will see...? Did you not get a new pair of glasses? I decided to do those kinds of things, to branch out and become someone new. When I went to Stanford, my freshman roommate was a pot-smoking Grateful Dead fan. Right away I started hanging out with the Grateful Dead crowd. When I found myself at a concert of some musician I had never heard of before, surrounded by a lot of people smoking pot, I thought I would be part of this little party with my friends. But I had a thought: 'How did I get here? Who are these people? Who am I?' Soon afterwards, I had a dream one night. I dreamed that all my friends from my different worlds were suddenly getting together at my house for a party. And I was paralyzed. I didn't know how to act! I woke up in a cold sweat. I realized I had different layers. There was my intense, goal-oriented, layer, since my high school was 70% Asian and I needed that. But my swimming friends were mostly non-Asian, and with them I had my laid back and a party-goer layer. By my senior year of high school, I was in student government with my friends thinking that we ran the school, so we thought of ourselves as having different faces: one face for the parents, one face for the administration, and one face to the students. We were sophisticated. I started peeling back in my mind each of the layers of me, and I discovered that after peeling many layers, I was an onion! Like Shrek: 'Onions have layers. Ogres have layers.' And I had layers myself, layers but no core.

Not only was I becoming more confused, I was growing in my awareness of my past. There were two main incidents. (1) The first was the time during my parents' arguing when I was in high school. Their arguments coincided with the time that I got my car and drivers' license. So whenever things were too uncomfortable for me, I just left. I would go to the park to mope or to a friend's house to be distracted. And I totally forgot about my little sister, who was in 6th grade at the time, and left her at home to deal with the mess that I didn't want to deal with. I didn't even think about her. It even took me 3 years to recognize later that that is what I had done. (2) The second was what happened with my high school girlfriend. You know how the big question if you're dating at the end of high school is, 'Are you going to stay together or not?' I wanted to stay together. She was more inclined to break up. I knew this was not a great relationship for us to be in, but because of the instability at home, I wanted something stable. So I pressured her for sex. What surprised me later was the cold logic behind it: If she sleeps with me, chances are higher that she's stay with me. What do you do when you start to become someone you don't like?

Party #4: A Wedding Banquet: v.1, 7 – 8a

And so I think you need to be aware of another option. You can live for the victory parties your parents can throw. You can live for the celebrity parties your friends can throw. You can live for your own little parties. Or you can live for the party Jesus throws. Let's look at a passage that tells us about that kind of party. Luke 14, verse 1 sets the context. 'It happened that when he went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching him closely.' Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he makes this pit stop. Right now, Jesus is this hot, controversial leader. He's been

drawing a big following. One of the Jewish leaders invites him in for a meal. Now at this point, the Pharisees are the religious people, and they think Jesus is a revolutionary. So they're watching him. But little do they know that he's also watching them. Look at v.7: 'And he began speaking a parable to the invited guests when he noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table.'

I'll describe the Pharisees in just a moment. In some ways, I'm very sympathetic to them. They thought they were really loving God, because the Jews were a minority ethnic group in a majority Roman world. The Pharisees were trying to be as Jewish as they could, getting back to their roots. So what did the Pharisees think about each other? Who prayed the longest last weekend? Who was the most eloquent? Who has the most titles attached to his name? Doctor. Ph.D. Doctor Ph.D. with whipped cream on top. Jesus has no title. He has no formal position, and he says in v.8, 'What kind of party do you think God throws?' Look at v.8, 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast...' Why does Jesus bring up a wedding feast? That's a very unique kind of party. But let's look into this some more.

What's Inappropriate – Self-Honoring: v.8b – 9

Now imagine what would happen if you went to a wedding feast and made that party about you. People do this in all kinds of ways. At a lot of weddings I've been to, the ceremony is beautiful, the reception begins beautifully, but then when it comes time for a toast, there's always some uncle or friend of the parents who stands up to make a toast, right? And how long does he go? He goes on for 5 – 10 minutes. I don't know what's more awkward – if they've had a little too much to drink, or if they're totally sober! Or, imagine if you go to a wedding, and there is someone there who just wants to get all this attention. When the bride comes walking down the aisle, they say, 'Hey, look at my iPod. Look at the pictures on my phone, or whatever.' Then at the reception, they try to get into every picture. They start dancing on the dance floor when only the bridal party is supposed to be there. Every conversation you have with them is really about them. How obnoxious is that?

Now why is this so awkward? Because who is the focal point of a wedding feast? The bride and groom. If you are a guest at a wedding feast, what are you supposed to feel? You're supposed to feel happy for the couple getting married! How are you supposed to act? You're supposed to act in a way that honors them and gives first place to them. A similar kind of thing might happen for you if your friend has a birthday, or if you have an older friend who graduates from high school. You're happy for *them*. You run little errands for *them*, and you hold things for *them*. And you're happy because this party is for *them*.

When my friends Alex and Alma got married, they asked me to be an usher. It wasn't as glam as being a groomsman, because that was reserved for his older friends and family, but hey, I was invited! It was a privilege. It was also a bit of work. I helped organize the bachelor party for Alex. On the day of, I helped people find their seats. And if the bride or groom needed something, I tried to help. Need a battery for your camera? Need an extra trash bag over there? I went and did it. Are all the presents being moved into the cars? Can you help? Afterwards, I was pretty exhausted. But I was also really happy. Because my friends were married. And it was absolutely clear that this party was not about me.

Life is not about you. But these Pharisees were totally turning a wedding party into their own little red-carpet party. Look at what Jesus says. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him,⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place.' In Jesus' day, the focal point of a wedding was the groom, though in our day it tends to be the bride. The groom and his family paid for everything. They hosted everything. They ordered the food and wine. The wedding was a reflection of the groom. At the wedding banquet that Jesus describes, who arranges where people sit? The groom. So if someone comes to sit down next to the groom, but he's not really a good friend, what will the groom do? He'll say, 'Excuse me. Could my friend sit here? There's a seat over there for you.' Jesus sees our love for him. That's why Jesus says to the Pharisees, 'What kind of party do you think life is? Do you think life is a party about you? No. It's a wedding party. And it's about me.'

I know this is a challenge for all of us. If you're Asian-American in a majority white culture, and if you're Christian in a majority secular culture, you might feel like the world around you is crazy, and that you can't

do anything about it. So you bring all your desires for a victory party, a celebrity party, or your own little parties to this group. You might compete among yourselves for ‘places of honor.’ And you start to have a hierarchy, a pecking order, a distinction between insiders and outsiders, and you know what that is and who sits where and who feels on the inside and who feels on the outside and who’s not even in this room. How do we not do that to one another? So you see it even here.

I was obsessed with places of honor during high school. But during my junior year of high school, my friend Malcolm, one of my three Christian friends, said to me, ‘Let’s go spend our spring break in Mexico.’ There was a group of Christian folks who were going to go there and do various things. I thought we’d be building affordable housing or new buildings or something: something I could see with my hands and be proud of, something that I could look back on and say, ‘That was a total guy thing to do, and I did that.’ Later I found out that 2,000 other Christians were going as part of the larger program. Well, we got there, a small town near the border of California and Mexico, and I saw poverty like I had never seen before. People were living in cardboard shacks with three walls and an aluminum roof. We had to be really careful about not drinking the water and being in the shower. And we didn’t get to build any buildings. Instead, we played with kids and taught them little Bible lessons. Back then, I didn’t like kids. All those kids cared about was: ‘Are you going to come back tomorrow?’ They didn’t care about the fact that I had big dreams and that I was going places. I sat in a ‘place of honor’ and I was going to sit in an even better ‘place of honor’ like the Stanford water polo team. But it hit me that the love the kids showed me was kind of like the unconditional love that God said He had for me; He didn’t love me because of what I had done or what I thought I was going to accomplish. That was a lot for me to handle. He also didn’t love me because I had screwed up either. That was also a lot to handle. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be there anymore. I was taking a week off of swimming training almost in the middle of the season to be there, and I was risking my performance that season to care about these kids. But I looked around me and there were 2,000 people there who loved Jesus who were glad to be in Mexico and glad to spend their time that way. They were just loving Jesus by being there, in the middle of this nothing town. At that moment, my life just seemed so selfish and small it was unbearable. I felt like I had wasted my life up to that point. On top of all that, meeting these Mexican people who were in dire poverty, who loved Jesus, challenged me: The places where I had sat just didn’t matter. That’s when I gave my life to Jesus. I wanted to know him, and it was okay to be humbled, because life was about Jesus. From that point in my life, Jesus began to free me from my obsession to be in the ‘places of honor’, from my resume, and to make me content with the real place of honor of just loving him and being loved by him.

The biggest reason why it’s hard to care for the poor and care for the world the way God does is because you won’t have victory parties, celebrity parties, and your own little parties if you do that. The biggest barrier to doing God’s will is self-importance.

What’s Appropriate – Honoring the Bridegroom: v.10 – 11

Look at the positive way of saying this in v.10 – 11. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place.’ Imagine that in this wedding reception party, you come in, and you know the bride and groom really well. But you’re just glad to be there, so you linger in the back, and you’re just taking it all in. You’re looking across the room at how happy the bride and groom are. You see all the people there and you think, ‘How honoring this is for them that all these people are here.’ And then they see you. They wave their hands to you and motion you forward. And they have you take a seat right at their table. Jesus says, ‘When the one who has invited you [i.e. the groom] comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ That’s a great moment. If you’re a friend of the groom, it really doesn’t matter where you sit. It doesn’t matter what other kids here think about you. It doesn’t matter if you’re a popular kid in these circles. You’re just glad to Jesus get honored. If you’re a friend of Jesus, he will bring you close to him.

That’s why when we read this, we need to hear Jesus’ heart. He doesn’t want to just crush us emotionally and grind us down to dust. Yes, humility is important, but not in a way that leaves us perpetually empty or afraid of feeling joy. The humility Jesus is talking about is the humility of recognizing that life is party not about us, but about him. It’s about him being honored, him feeling joy, and because we love him, he shares that with us. So we are not empty but filled up with his happiness for his sake.

As I've been reflecting on this, I thought of a friend that I had in high school who learned this in a deep way. She was one of the three Christian friends God used to bring me to Jesus. Her name was Grace. Even though I'm not Korean, Grace was my *nuna*, my big sister. She was a year older than me. We would always talk and we would give each other dating advice and stuff. I loved Grace a lot, but all the way up until her junior year, Grace was a resume hound. She had been in student government since 8th grade. She was used to victory parties. Well at the end of her junior year, Grace ran for student body president. At first, no one else was going to run against her just because Grace was so experienced and so well liked. But someone did: this girl, who was a friend of Grace's, and she campaigned hard and won. Grace was fairly devastated, and her senior year when we hung out I noticed she was a lot quieter. A lot of her friends started dating their senior year, too, but Grace didn't. That was another difficult thing to her. Finally, she didn't even get into the top colleges she wanted. There were no real victory parties for Grace that year. But I remember her having more peace that year than before; she had more quiet strength than she did before; she was a warmer person than she was before. Grace became aware of a bigger party going on around her, a party with Jesus at the center. She was celebrating with him. And she found that the party of Jesus was far better than any other. She loved Jesus. He loved her. It was enough.

What does it mean to love God? It means that you enjoy the party Jesus throws over all other parties. It means that you carry an awareness of Jesus' party into all the other parties you are a part of. And during it all, you point to the reality of the much bigger party going on: Jesus'.

Where are you with all this? For some of you, you may not really know Jesus. My encouragement to you is that you would begin to find out more about him. For others of you, you've been sitting on the fence about Jesus. You've known about him but you're wavering. My hope for you is that during this weekend, there would be something that catches your heart and mind, and that you would choose Jesus. For those of you who have known Jesus for a while now, the question for you is this: How do we make our communities into places of healing and friendship and welcome and hospitality? How do we not compete for 'places of honor' inside the youth group, but instead remind ourselves of a larger reality? Remember: there is a much larger party going on around us. It is not for us, though we are invited; it's for Jesus. And all of reality is centered on him. Will we choose to be in that party? Will we choose to love him? He will give us more peace, more quiet strength. He will make us warmer people. We'll be content doing small, insignificant things for people we never had much affection for. All because this is a party where Jesus is to be honored, and we love him with all we are.