



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

September 18, 2016

Discussion Guide

Myth of the country club

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- When it comes to the experience of community, what are your expectations? Could you elaborate?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A

SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background of the meals in the ancient world and how Jesus used meals to make a gospel-oriented statement.
- Read Luke 14.1-24 aloud, seeking to be present at this meal with Jesus. Read the text once more, paying attention to those around you at the meal.
- At this meal, Jesus addresses the issue of community. What exhortations does Jesus make concerning community? Seek to find as many as possible.
- Do you feel that Jesus' exhortations regarding community are in-step or out-of-step with the expectations people in the Church have regarding community? Could you explain?
- Are Jesus' exhortations in-step or out-of-step with what you expect regarding community. Could you elaborate?
- While the journey of faith takes community, real community is often messy because it is made up of messy people. What effect, if any, does the prospect or experience of messy community have upon you?
- What might it look like to build community with messy people in an intentional way? What, if anything, keeps us from doing this with people already around us?

- Jesus indicates that God smiles upon (blesses) the intentional building of community with messy people. In what ways, if any, does this speak to your feelings about messy community?
- Consider concluding with prayer, asking God for the grace to form the bonds of community with people whose lives might be messy.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

MEALS

Meals in the ancient world were about a lot more than just eating. Meals were social events which made important statements about social standing and relations. When someone hosted a meal, he was choosing to act as a patron in his act of hosting. In an honor-shame based society like the ancient middle-east, this placed each of the invited guests in a status of client. Thus, to accept an invitation to a meal placed the recipient/ attendee in a place of “owing” an honor debt to the host. In the ancient world, honor debts were required to be repaid. In the case of meals, the typical expected repayment was the extension of reciprocal invitation by the guest to a meal of equal or greater standing to the one which the guest had experienced. Because meal attendance required this manner of reciprocity, often those who were invited were those who could fulfill the expectation of reciprocity. Therefore, it was not uncommon for all of the guests at a meal to be social equals. Social unequals could attend the same meal, but often they were seated in different rooms and given different food and wine in keeping with their appropriate social status.

This sort of social ranking was actually quite common at meals. Where one sat and what he ate indicated how important (or unimportant!) he was within the group of attendees. Pliny describes what this social ranking looked like in his letters:

It would be a long story, and of no importance, were I to recount too particularly by what accident I (who am not fond at all of society) supped lately with a person, who in his own opinion lives in splendor combined with economy; but according to mine, in a sordid but expensive manner. Some very elegant dishes were served up to himself and a few more of the company; while those that were placed before the rest were cheap and paltry. He had apportioned in small flagons three different sorts of wine; but

you are not to suppose it was that the guests might take their choice: on the contrary, that they might not choose at all. One was for himself and me; the next for his friends of a lower order (for you must know, he measures out his friendship according to the degrees of quality); and the third for his own freed-men and mine. (Pliny, Letters, 2.6)

Because the seating arrangement often determined the food and wine served which indicated status, it was not uncommon for guests to jostle for seating positions at the table (Luke 14.7).

Perhaps the most important aspect of meals involved the issue of acceptance and welcome. Those invited to a meal were viewed as social equals, either in social standing or in the acceptance of common ideals. To share a meal with another in the ancient world was a statement of the existence of community. Only those accepted within one's community were invited and welcomed to the table. This understanding explains why one of the primary complaints against Jesus concerned those with whom he ate (Matthew 9.10-11; 11.16-19; Luke 15.1-2). By eating with outcasts, Jesus was making an unmistakable statement that these outcasts were accepted and welcomed by him, without cleaning up first!

THE TEXT

LUKE 14.12-24: *WHO SITS AROUND THE TABLE*

The context of Jesus' parable of the great banquet are found within the context of a meal, perhaps even a great banquet. Jesus had accepted the dinner invitation of a prominent Pharisee (Luke 14.1). Most likely, the statement of prominence reflects his social and financial standing, and not just his spiritual standing in the community. While the invitation to a meal indicates social acceptance of Jesus, those who attend are watching him closely, probably trying to get a better sense of who Jesus is. However, Jesus is also watching those in attendance (Luke 14.1, 7). What Jesus witnesses is the typical jostling for position around the table as people seek places of honor (Luke 14.7). Sensing that the guests and host are behaving in ways that demonstrate wrong ideas about the nature of community, Jesus addresses both. First, he addresses the guest, exhorting them to not seek positions of honor within their community, but to display humility and take places of service (Luke 14.10). In this, Jesus places high value upon humility and service in

community. Next, he addresses the host, exhorting him to invite people whom he normally would not invite to a banquet, people who were not of his social standing nor capable of reciprocating his invitation (Luke 14.12-13). There is much within Jesus' statement here because a meal in the ancient world was about much more than eating. With a meal, those who gathered around the table were physically signifying they accepted and were bound to one another in community. Therefore, Jesus encourages his host to enter into community with those who were of lower standing, the outcasts of his society, intentionally. Jesus states that this intentional entering into community with societal outcasts was pleasing to God (this person was blessed), and that God would reward the person who behaved in such a manner (Luke 14.14).

If Jesus' exhortation to the guests was uncomfortable, his exhortation to his host was excruciatingly painful. Not only was this not common practice, but it made no social sense. The ones with whom Jesus encouraged his host to build intentional community lived messy dirty lives. To connect with them would degrade the status of the host and make him the laughing stock of his community. This was certainly not the expected teaching from a rabbi. In an effort to get the conversation back on track with more appropriate (proper spiritual) matters, one of the guests states that the truly blessed person was the one who found himself welcomed to God's eschatological banquet. The guest here is referencing the Pharisaic belief that an aspect of God's eschatological Kingdom would involve a great banquet which rewarded the righteous (Isaiah 25.6; Psalm 22.26).

Hearing this statement, Jesus chooses to tell a story which challenges the common presuppositions concerning who would be found around God's banquet table. However, in its context, the story provides a foundation for Jesus' encouragement to his host. His host should build community with the outcasts of his society, because to do so was to imitate the actions of God himself.

Jesus begins his story by setting the stage for a great banquet hosted by a man (probably a king, Matthew 22.2). In typical fashion, banquets of this magnitude required a double-invitation. The first invitation was sent to indicate who was invited, while the second indicated the readiness

and timing of the banquet. In Jesus' story, the first invitation has already gone out, and as can be seen, those invited are of great standing like the host. The first and second guest have so much money that they can afford to buy field and oxen, sight unseen. This is unheard of in the ancient world. The third is of such standing that he can afford to go far beyond the abstaining from war in keeping with his recent marriage (Deuteronomy 20.7; 24.5). He can abstain from all aspects of normal life.

Each of these wealthy and prominent guests have already accepted and agreed to attend. However, when the second invitation is sent, each of the three guest refuses to attend. In fact, in the story, the three are simply examples of all the guests. Every single guest refuses to attend, each providing a lame excuse which indicates that their possessions and personal lives are of greater importance than a relationship with their host. This social slight angers the host who instructs his servant to invite those whom would normally not be invited, the outcasts of society, the poor, crippled, blind, and lame. Not only are these people considered outcasts of society but they were also understood to be cast aside by God (Leviticus 21.17-23). The servant does as his master commands but the banquet hall is not full. Wanting as many to attend as possible, the host sends his servant out into the countryside to urge more of those whom society had cast out to attend. The urging would be necessary because none who heard the invitation would believe they truly were welcome. However, the host is bent upon intentionally creating community with these people. At the same time, those we would normally expect to be in attendance are excluded.

As stated, Jesus' point is two-fold. First, Jesus challenges the ideas about whom God accepts. According to Jesus, God accepts and welcomes those who are far from put together. Instead, it is the put together who seem to have no time for God. Therefore, God does not welcome them to his table because they have refused relationship with him in their pursuit of other matters in life. Second, with respect to community, God intentionally builds community with those who are not put together, those who are the oddballs and outcasts of society. Because this is the way in which he behaves, his people are to act in the same manner. The people of God, like God, are to seek to welcome all into community, including the oddballs and outcasts rather than simply seeking to have community with

those who are like them or those who have life put together.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

Is there a perfect church? I say no such thing exists, but how I long for one. Honestly, over the years it has been tempting to look out and imagine that some church, any church might be better (closer to perfect) than the one I am currently in. Perhaps this is no truer than when it comes to the experience of community. Church takes community because faith takes community. We simply cannot make the journey of faith alone. To do so indicates we are most likely not on the journey of faith. However, community is difficult for me. Why? Is it because I am an introvert? Sure. I am certain that plays a part, but I really do enjoy people. So what is the problem? The problem is people. Community is difficult because people are difficult. People are often messy. They don't have their act together and when this is the case their mess spills over onto me in the context of community. Their sharp edges poke me and sometimes make me bleed. Their wounds and short-comings are invisible to them, but they are more than happy to see all of mine. They have unrealistic expectations and often they are just rude and unfeeling. Being in community with people like that is far from exhilarating. No. It is more like a nightmare at times, trying to navigate the landmines, seen and unseen. It would be a whole lot easier if I could be in community with people like me, people who had the same background, the same understanding of the world, the same political view, the same approach to faith. Community with those people would be magical. So, sometimes I withdraw from those in front of me, scanning the horizon for people who are just like me, people with whom I can be in community.

What I am coming to learn is those people don't exist. There is only one me. No one has my same story so no one will ever be my doppel-ganger. The only people I will ever find are people just like the ones in front of me, messy, in-process people. And, when I am honest, that is the person they find when they encounter me. Somehow God intends that community involve messy people intentionally connecting with one another, welcoming and receiving one another. Somehow the only basis for good, spiritual community is the simple acceptance of God's invitation which puts all sorts of people

together we would not normally put together, and somehow it is good right. Somehow, this ragtag group of oddballs and outcasts who have said "Yes" to God make him smile.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

Is there such a thing as a perfect church? Deep down, I think we all believe there is one. A great deal of what we refer to as "church-hopping" rests upon the idea that a church "out there" is better and more perfect than the one you are currently with. If no better options are on the horizon, we simply dance around the fringe until we find something better. This is particularly true with the experience of community. The journey of faith takes community, but we often struggle to connect with one another because the people with whom we might connect are less than appealing. They are messy, in-process people who have sharp painful edges to them. So, we hold back waiting for people who are a bit more put together, a bit less prickly, a bit more like us because community should be easy not messy. In reality, true spiritual community is very messy. It is messy because it consists of a ragtag group of oddballs and outcasts who have said "Yes" to God's invitation, intentionally holding to one another. If that isn't ripe for messy, I don't know what is. However, it is this willingness to hold to one another that makes God smile and forms the basis of true spiritual community. This week, consider what, if anything, might be holding you back from stepping into community. Go deeper than the typical answers involving time. We make time for the things we value. No one controls our schedule but us. So dig deeper. Ask yourself why you might not intentionally connect in real and authentic ways with the people who surround you every Sunday. As you come to answers, hold these before God and ask him to speak into them. Consider journaling about your conversation with God.



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