

6.5.2016 Trinity 2 (Luke 14:16-24)

"First things first." It's a saying we've all heard – a saying that's all about setting priorities...

Bill McCartney was the head football coach for the Colorado Buffaloes from 1982-1994. The world of college football was shocked when he announced his retirement at the end of the 1994 season, because he was at the top of his profession and at the height of his coaching career. This coach had taken a directionless and destitute Colorado team that had gone 7-26 in the last three seasons and turned them into a team that under his direction won three Big Eight championships and a national title. So, what made Bill McCartney retire from this amazing career coaching college football? Priorities.

After deciding to retire he said, "I'm leaving coaching, and I'm going to take a whole year to re-evaluate my priorities. Is God first? Is my family second? Is my work third?" McCartney said later, "I enjoyed coaching too much. And that's what pulled me out of it." Bill McCartney re-evaluated his priorities. He dedicated his life to Christ, to his family, and worked with Promise Keepers. A Christ-centered organization he founded that is dedicated to introducing men to Jesus Christ and helping them grow as Christians.

Our Gospel reading this morning is also about priorities. It tells the story of people who failed to put first things first. This parable speaks of a great supper and the focus is on two aspects of the story - the people who were invited to the great supper, but didn't come because it wasn't their first concern, and the response of the man who was giving the dinner to the casual disrespect of his invitation. In this story, the people of Israel were the invited guests, the host is God, the dinner is salvation, and we are the ones along the highway and in the hedges, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

To properly understand this parable we need to look at the context of the entire chapter of Luke in which it appears. In this

chapter Jesus is facing a test at the home of Pharisee where He had been invited to eat. They bring a man in to see if Jesus will heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus asks them for their judgment in the situation, and they refuse to speak, so He heals the man. Then Jesus explains His action by asking them, "Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?" Clearly, this is an issue of priorities: Sabbath Law or the life of your animal? The clear choice appears to be the animal, but to say so might be seen as blasphemy, so they remain silent. (Luke 14:1-6)

Then Jesus talks about humility. He suggests that they shouldn't seek a place of honor when invited to dinner, but take the lowest seat, and allow themselves to be honored by being moved up, rather than humiliated by being made to give the place of honor to someone else. Of course, there are risks with humility. Your host may not see anything wrong with you taking the place of least significance, and you'll find out where he thinks you really belong. The question is, which is more important, the place of honor with the risk of embarrassment, or the opportunity for recognition and honor with the risk of finding out that you do not merit any? Again, it is a question of priorities – what's more important to you? (Luke 14:7-11)

Then Jesus tells the man who had invited Him that when he makes a feast, he shouldn't invite family, friends, or rich neighbors - people who may return the kindness of his invitation, but rather to invite those who would have need of the invitation, and no means to repay his kindness - the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. Jesus says that such kindness would be repaid by God at the resurrection. This presents another setting of priorities. Do we choose good times and good company here and now, or would we rather have the best times and perfect companionship in the presence of God in His kingdom? (Luke 14:12-14)

So, Jesus has been speaking about priorities, and confronting how everyone tends to deal with life, with one another, and with God. He's been explaining how God looks at things - His divine

values and priorities. Now that we've placed the verses of our Gospel reading in context, consider the moment that has arrived.

"A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready." (Luke 14:16-17) The moment has arrived - and it's never at convenient time that it comes. God has made the call, supper is ready, everything is prepared, come to the feast; but those invited - His Chosen People - found themselves too wrapped up in their own lives to accept the invitation.

Luke tells us, "They all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto Him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it... Another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them... And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." (Luke 14:18-20)

These men certainly have a right to their conduct their business and enjoy their family. None of this was evil gain or something they shouldn't be doing. Still the truth remains: When the call to dinner came it took second place to other things. It wasn't that the dinner was unimportant, it was just a matter of priorities - putting first things first. The men in this parable were so wrapped up in enjoying the blessings of God that they lost sight of both the Giver and of the purpose of the gifts. The land, the oxen, and the wife were more real and more urgent to them than God and salvation. They didn't say that they didn't want God or eternal life, they just wanted these things on their terms - at a time when they were ready. They forgot that God's ways are not our ways. From His perspective anything preferred to or more urgent than Him is equal to loving that thing and despising God.

The feast that God has prepared came at the greatest cost. He will not have empty seats at His table. So He "said to His servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the Lord said unto the servant, Go out into

the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” (Luke 14:21-23)

God went out and brought in the unworthy and gave them a seat at His table. We are the poor, blind, crippled, and worthless people who have been chosen by Him to receive the riches of life and salvation. We did not choose Him – He chose us. We did not find Him – He found us in the highways, hedges, and the back-alleys of this life. That’s a beautiful picture of the grace of God.

Jesus prepared this feast of salvation by His life, death, resurrection, and ascension; and compelled us to come in and sit down at His table. The table is ready. The banquet is prepared. In front of us today is life and salvation, forgiveness and peace, resurrection and joy.

Of course, now that the table is prepared for us, we also run the risk of taking it for granted, and finding other things more exciting, more urgent, and more pleasurable. We may find ourselves with what appears to be a good excuse to skip the meal, but this parable illustrates just what taking this invitation for granted can lead to, or who it will lead us away from. This is about setting priorities. If we, like the people of Israel, find that there are more urgent things in our lives, then there are more urgent things in our lives. God doesn’t want anything from us that we can’t freely give. The Lord loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

But we must remember, God will not be put in second place, and salvation will not wait for us to exercise our freedom to have and to do and to enjoy as we please. If we take the things of His kingdom for granted or decide other things are more important, we run the risk of finding out that the dinner bell rang while we were busy with something else.

Like coach Bill McCartney, we need to correctly prioritize our lives and be careful about the importance we place on those aspects of our lives that we enjoy most. We need to put first things first. This means putting God first in every aspect of our lives. This

parable is a powerful reminder that we must let go of what is good to take hold of what is best.