

Luke 14:15-24

“When one of those who sat at table with him heard this, he said to him, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for all is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”

I don't know whether you had the opportunity to read or hear Tony Campolo? A few years ago Patricia and I had the privilege of hearing and meeting this Christian sociologist, writer, teacher and speaker Tony Campolo. If you haven't, I hope you'll find and read his books especially the one entitled *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*. Tony tells a story which is in the first chapter of his book – one of the most moving stories I've ever heard.

Tony flew to Hawaii for a speaking engagement, and because of the time change -- couldn't sleep when he settled in his hotel. So, about 3:30 in the morning, he got out of bed dressed, found himself wondering up and down the streets of Honolulu looking for a place to get something to eat. Up a side street, he found a greasy spoon kind of place. The fat guy behind the counter, Harry came over and asked him, "What d'ya want?" "Just a cup of coffee and a donut," Tony said. He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. As Tony sat there munching his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30 in the morning the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to his displeasure, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous woman of the evening – prostitutes.

It was a small place and so Tony ended up with a prostitute sitting on either side. Their talk was loud and crude. Tony felt completely out of place and was just about to make his getaway when he overheard the woman sitting beside him say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." Her friend responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday?'"

"Come on!" said the woman sitting next to Tony. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to always put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard that, he had thought and then he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women had left. Then he called over the fat guy behind the counter and asked him, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah" he answered. "The one right next to me, does she come here every night?" "Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes, Yeah; she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"

“Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. “What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her – right here – tomorrow night?”

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks and he answered with measured delight, “That’s a great idea! I like it! That’s a really great idea!” Calling his wife, who did all the cooking in the back, he shouted, “Hey! Come out here! This guy’s got a great idea. Tomorrow’s Agnes’ birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her -- right here – tomorrow night!”

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, “That’s wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything nice and kind for her.” So Tony said, “If it’s O.K. with you, I’ll get back here tomorrow morning early and decorate the place. I’ll even get a birthday cake!” “No way,” said Harry. The birthday cake's my thing. I’ll make the cake.”

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back at the diner. He had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!”

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 it seemed like every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes ... and Tony! At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. Everybody was ready. When they came in, they all screamed, "Happy Birthday!"

Tony said never had he seen a person so flabbergasted...so stunned...so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, they all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As they came to an end of singing "Happy Birthday dear Agnes," her eyes moistened. Then, when Harry brought her the birthday cake with all the candles on it, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, “Harry, is it all right with you if I I mean is it O.K. if I kind of ... what I want to ask you is ... is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while longer? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?” Harry shrugged and answered, “Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to.” “Can I?” she asked. Then, looking at Tony she said, “I live just down the street a couple of doors. I just want to take the cake home, O.K.? I'll be right back. Honest!”

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and, carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, Agnes left. When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, Tony broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray?”

Looking back on it later, Tony said, it seemed more than strange for a preacher/sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning.

But then it just felt like the right thing to do. He prayed for Agnes. He prayed for her salvation. He prayed that her life would be changed and that God would open Himself up to her.

When Tony finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said “Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?” In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answered, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

Harry said, “No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!”ⁱ Well, wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we? Wouldn't we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes and/or homeless individuals at 3:30 in the morning? Or does that sound too radical for you? Is it too radical for you? Well, that's what Jesus was talking about in this morning's passage.

We can miss the party, messing around with our everyday lives. That's what our Scripture lesson is about – missing the party. That's not exactly the wording Jesus used, but the truth is the same. Jesus' image is that of a banquet – a party that none of us should miss. I remind you that one of the

most powerful images for the Kingdom of God in the New Testament is that of a great feast, a banquet. Jesus used and lived the image often. *“Jesus ate and drank with a wide mix of people. He ate with the disciples, with tax collectors and sinners, with Pharisees and publicans, with outcasts, and with a notorious cheat named Zacchaeus.”* His enemies often called Him a drunk and a glutton. Sometimes they asked Him why He did not fast like the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus answered, *“There may come a time when fasting is appropriate; but now is not that time. Now is the time for feasting.”*

In the earlier part of chapter 14, Jesus told another parable -- similar to this one and He closed that parable with these words: *“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a banquet in order to make this point: The Kingdom of God is joy unlimited. We Christians should be the most joyful folks on earth. After all, our past sins are forgiven. Our eternal future is guaranteed. The God of the universe loves us. His Son died for us. We are His sons and daughters, His princes and princesses.

Life cannot deliver any heartbreak or tragedy that His grace will not see us through. And God is going to have the final word with his world. Now, that's worth celebrating! Are you celebrating this morning?

But we don't always look like celebrating people of joy, do we? Some people and/or congregations look like they just received next year's tax notices! The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, "When you talk about heaven, let your face light up with a heavenly glory. When you talk about hell, your everyday face will probably do." The truth of that observation should hurt. It should hurt all of us.

The writer Bill Henderson tells a story of meeting a man aboard a cruise ship who claimed to be an expert in guessing professions. "See that man over there," he said. "He is a physician." Bill checked and sure enough he was right. "How could you tell?" he asked the man. "Well," he said, "I saw the caring lines on his forehead and could tell he was a person of great compassion." Bill Henderson pointed to someone else and said, "What about him? What does he do?" "That's a lawyer," the expert said. Bill checked and sure enough, he was. The expert explained that the man had a scholarly look and was somewhat formal, indicating an attorney. Then Bill

pointed to another man. The expert studied him and said, "That's a preacher." Bill approached the man and asked, "Are you a preacher?" "No," said the man. "I'm just seasick; that's the reason I look like this." How strange that many Christians have a long-faced reputation. Jesus could not have been that way; if he had been, children would not have clung to him so readily.

We in the church should be rippling with joy. We should be constantly adding to our number those who have just learned that God loves them in spite of their failings. Teenagers who may have very low self-esteem should learn here that they are unique creations of God and indescribably precious. Divorced people who often are burdened with guilt and financial problems should find a supportive family here to help them start over. Do they?

Our joy should find expression in our warmth toward each other. Church should be a hugging kind of place. A social scientist in California has written that everyone needs four hugs a day for survival, eight hugs a day for maintenance, and twelve hugs per day for growth. But did you know that some people do not receive a single hug all week except when they come to church. Even then many people today still don't hug.

We the people are the church and we should have the radiance of Christ's love on our faces and warmth in our handshakes and hugs. We are part of the best party on earth! Everyone Is Invited! Live your life like you know that! Look like you believe it!

In the parable this morning Jesus told, there were guests invited to the wedding but they would not come. In fact, they not only did not go but they made excuses why they couldn't come. So the king sent his servants out into the streets and invited to his banquet anybody who would come.

I hate exclusive-ism. We should all be excited in the wideness of the Gospel's invitation: Whosoever will, may come. So often, the church looks like some sanctimonious social club hiding behind stain glass walls. In many towns and cities you can type a church by the social class which attends. To our disgrace, 11:00 AM on Sunday mornings is still the most segregated hour in America. Isn't it a shame that we can almost always describe churches as white or black? How desperately we need more churches that cannot be typed racially.

How much more powerful our witness would be if we were more diverse, in terms of racial and socio-economic make-up. We, so-called, Christians claim that all persons can find unity in Christ, but the world is skeptical of what we say. They say, "Show us." Why is it then we have a hard time showing them?

We are all sinners saved by grace and as such we should live like that. Our actions, all our actions should emphasize this. The joy we speak about should be bubbling over. The joy should be written on our faces, and if one is hurting then it is our responsibility to help carry them. We are to "*bear one another's burdens.*" We have a responsibility to be there to help support them. Is joy seen on your face? Do you bear one another's burdens?

Do you get it? Do you hear what I'm saying? The Kingdom of Heaven is a party – it's a banquet – a banquet we can share together. But remember, it's not an exclusive one, all are welcomed. Let God's glory shine through you each and every day; Lift up those around you, and most of all; don't miss it – Don't miss the party.

ⁱ Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, Word Publishing, Dallas 1990.