

“The Church Dinner”

It was not your ordinary church supper! The church social hall was jam-packed. It was noisy and somewhat chaotic with the loud talk... and lots of laughter. Children darting here and there and parents chasing after them. Yeah, some of the usual stuff you find at church suppers. But what stood out at this one was *who was there!*

For instance, the bartender at the local hotel – that rather rundown building on the east end of town, that was a favorite watering hole for some of the area’s rougher characters. One of the guys who tended bar was there.

And there were a dozen or so elderly ladies and men from the nursing home outside of town – the nursing home that was certainly not the nicest or cleanest facility in the area. Someone had picked them up and brought them in the church van.

There were a handful of men who were part of the AA group that met in the church on Thursday evenings.

Sick people were there at the church supper. People with walkers. A few in wheel chairs. One guy was there who carried with him one of those little portable oxygen tanks. There was a lady whose hair was just growing back after having gone through chemotherapy – but her almost bald look didn’t seem to hold her back from socializing with those at her table.

You couldn’t help but notice the special needs children there – a number of Downs Syndrome kids. And older mentally challenged people. They were there with their mentors and house parents, bussed in from several of the group homes in the county.

One couldn’t tell just by looking, but word was that 3 or 4 of the guests that night had recently been released from prison.

Believe it or not, there were teenagers there in the fellowship hall. Teenagers in church – can you imagine that! Not clean cut teenagers, mind you. Most of the guys had ear rings. One had a ring in his nose. There was a girl there with hair that was half purple and half green. Almost all of the older kids had tattoos. The one guy’s neck and arms were covered with tattoos. Some of the kids came on their skate boards, and parked them by the doors that led into the social hall.

Most of the people at this banquet weren’t dressed that well. Torn jeans and funky sneakers or flip-flops were the order of the day. It was pretty obvious their clothes weren’t bought at Macy’s or Coldwater Creek, but probably from Walmart or some clothing bank or consignment shop.

Of course, some of the church members were there – regular worship attenders, some of the church leaders. But they were far outnumbered by the outside crowd.

If you stood back and surveyed the people there that night in the church fellowship hall, you would have to note that by and large this was not a gathering of the VIPS in town – those with money, or influence, or a sterling reputation. No, this was more of a ragamuffin crew.

But the amazing thing is: everybody seemed to be having a good time and enjoying each other's company. There was a lot of mixing and mingling, as people made an effort to get acquainted with those around them. Some of the teenagers even helped take care of the younger children and the really old folk. And one of the most impressive things was that the church people there weren't clustered together in their own little groups, enjoying each other's company, but circulating among the crowd, doing their best to make everyone feel warmly welcomed.

No...this was not your typical church supper.....

So, how did all this come about?

Well, things were a lot different up until a couple of years ago. Back then, every so often there would be a luncheon after the worship service, or an evening covered dish meal with some kind of program. It might be a missions program, or a film, or a guest speaker. It'd be announced to the congregation, promoted as an event worth attending. "Come and bring your friends!" the bulletin announcement would say. Sometimes a good number of church people would come out. Other times, hardly a few would show up. Apparently they were busy with others things, or just not interested. More so than not, tables would be set and chairs put into place, and many of them would remain empty because most of the church people stayed home.

It got to be frustrating. And disheartening.

After some serious soul-searching, several of the more imaginative church leaders, along with the pastor, determined that they needed to change their focus. If their own people didn't seem interested in what the church had to offer – beyond just Sunday morning worship – then perhaps the church needed to broaden its base and change its goals.

Just about that time a new family moved into the area and started attending the church. Before relocating, they had been very involved in an active congregation that had a remarkable record of outreach into the community. This couple – a husband and wife in their late thirties – were rather outspoken and not at all bashful. They said, "This church needs to get beyond itself. God isn't concerned just about us, but about the people in our community – especially those whom the church tends to write off as unreachable." And even though the pastor had been preaching that for years, somehow hearing it from this couple seemed to provide a spark.

These new folk proved to be just the catalyst needed to embolden the few church leaders who really wanted to bring about change.

The man – his name was Todd – began to attend the AA meetings at the church. A recovering alcoholic himself, he had been "dry" for years and had long ago stopped attending AA meetings. But he began to attend the one at the church, as a way of making some connections with people outside the congregation. Not only that, he began to spend some of his Friday evenings at the tavern on the east side of town. He would sit at the bar and drink Diet Cokes, and just talk with

people. Mostly listen. After a while, people began to open up to him. This gave him some opportunities to share some things about his own life and how he had been changed by the power of Christ. In fact, he had some long talks with one of the bartenders there – and had invited him to the dinner that night.

Todd's wife, Ann, was a social worker. After moving into town, she got a job with a social service agency, and had oversight of some of the group homes in the area. Forming a bond with some of the Christians who were mentors or house parents, she made an extra effort to invite some of these folk whenever their church was having a special event or a church supper.

Todd and Ann's love for Christ and their energetic spirit started to rub off on a few of the church leaders. One of the men in the church had recently gone to a healing service in a neighboring church, and had been healed. He suggested to their pastor that their church start a Sunday afternoon healing service, and make a special effort to advertise it within the community. The pastor dragged his feet on this at first, but when the church leader offered to lead the service some Sundays, the pastor agreed. Although there were never that many people there on a Sunday afternoon, people did come – mostly people outside the church. Some healings took place. And some of those who attended the healing services began to come to Sunday morning worship, mostly out of gratitude that the church had reached out to them in their time of need.

These successes in outreach and service began to generate more interest in reaching out to the community. For years the church had talked about providing something for the youth in town – there really wasn't anything for them. Eventually the church decided to open its doors and use the facility as a meeting place for kids. They used part of their parking lot as a skateboard park. Their church social hall became a mini-rec center for youth. It took a while to take hold, but eventually more and more kids began to come.

When there was an area wide appeal for churches to host meetings for persons being released from prison, to help them re-enter society, one of the men on the church board who's brother had recently been released from jail suggested that the church host one of these ex-offenders programs. The board agreed.

One lady in the church spearheaded an effort to establish a clothing bank. It was hard work to keep it up and running, and sometimes it was difficult to get enough people in the congregation to help, but distributing making free clothing available to people in the community provided a much needed service. Whenever a church dinner was to be held, those coming to the clothing bank always received a special invitation to attend.

And so....changes were taking place in that congregation! Church luncheons and covered dish suppers *just for the congregation* - well, these were pretty much dropped.

And instead, every so often a special meal would be held in the church, and an all-out effort would be made to invite others beyond the church to come and enjoy a good free meal. And many did.

I want to read some Scripture, from Luke 14, verses 15-24. It's a parable of Jesus.

"When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' Jesus replied: 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

Jesus told this story about a man who prepared a large banquet feast, and invited a lot of people to attend. But when the day of the feast arrived, all the invited guests began to make excuses why they couldn't come. Furious (and no doubt hurt and insulted) the host told his servants to go out into the streets and find people who were poor, or crippled, or blind, and bring them in. And so they did. They didn't get enough people to fill all the empty seats, so again the servants were ordered to go out into the roads and country lanes and alleyways and bring people in, because the master wanted his banquet hall filled. "None of those originally invited will get a taste of my feast," he said.

This is a story about the kingdom of God. Who's invited. Who gets in. Jews envisioned the kingdom of God to be a great banquet feast. In fact, the story Jesus told was prompted by someone saying, "Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15).

Jesus originally told this story as a wake-up call to the Jewish religious leaders. They were sure that *they* would have a prominent place in the kingdom banquet. And they were sure that *other people* wouldn't even be there – especially people who didn't bother to keep the religious rules and regulations that they did. If they had their way, God's kingdom would be limited to *them*, and *those like them*.

But that isn't God. And that wasn't Jesus. By reaching out to ordinary people, Jesus demonstrated that God's love and concern was far more encompassing than that of the scribes and Pharisees. God's kingdom was not going to be limited to an elite little group, "insiders", like them.

The banquet Jesus described – with its guests made up of the poor and the lame and the blind – well, that's a picture of what God's kingdom is going to be like! The religious leaders, with their

pride and narrow exclusivism, would be left out, for by and large they rejected Jesus and His message. On the other hand, the so-called “riffraff” - the irreligious people ignored or despised by the religious leaders – many of them believed the message of Jesus, and found their way into the kingdom of God.

So maybe by now your mind has drifted off a bit and you’ve been thinking of church suppers, church dinners, church brunches, that you’ve been part of. And the simple question: Who’s there? And how much does that reflect the kingdom of God?

When we meet to eat in the church, who’s there? The poor, the lame, the blind? In today’s terms - the unchurched, the irreligious, the fringe people - are they there?

Or, are our church breakfasts and dinners little gatherings of “insiders” who sit with their friends and talk with their friends, with little concern for those who may be outside of our “inner circle”?

And even the meals we serve in our home? Are people outside of our family or friendship circle ever invited and included?

Jesus had something interesting to say about who should be invited to our meals. “Then Jesus said...’When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’” (Luke 14:12-14).

Let me read that again! *“Then Jesus said...’When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’” (Luke 14:12-14).*

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