

Title: “The Gathering”

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Isaiah 25:1-9, Luke 6:32-36

11/26/2020

Lesson: *We gather together those that we love, those that we care for, those that concern us, but Christ wills us to gather everyone around our table just as he wills everyone around his.*

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Gospel from Luke, starting in verse 32

³² “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Just for the record.... The following is fictitious; all of these people are products of my imagination.

Tomorrow, Uncle Jimmy will be over. It is news because he wasn't around these past years because of his girlfriend. I guess she is out of the picture so he's planning on showing up. Not that anyone is really excited to see him. He's one of those people that hates the establishment of... well, of anything. We have long ago learned what phrases get him going but it seems like every time we talk to him there is a new establishment or institution that is the source of the world's problems and he drones on about it for hours. Ask him about God and he'll tell you that if He actually exists, he has abandoned us long ago.

That's Uncle Jimmy and I wish I could say he was an exception in our family, but I can't. In fact, he might be the sanest one of the bunch! My cousin Kathy is as far from normal as the east is from the west. It's understandable because of her past. She came from a broken home with abuse and alcohol and who knows what else. Her parents were unloving and she doesn't talk to them any longer but she freely talks *about* them when asked (and sometimes even when you don't ask). She says that she is focused on “finding” and “healing” herself but that seems to not include God. I asked her about that once and her reply was that he didn't protect her so she wants nothing to do with him.

Then there is Grandpa Bob. He has a lot of money, though no one really knows how or what he *actually* does to earn it. He is generous with it, but it is clear to everyone that his wealth is his main focus in his life. He has long since abandoned God in his pursuit of more money and power.

Let me quickly introduce you to one more person. It's David. He's another cousin and lives a perfect life. Just ask him; he'll tell you. He keeps a record of every time he attends church, every time he prays, every time he opens his bible, and who knows what else. You can pick him out in our family because he's the one that will be talking about what good work he just completed for "God's poor people" or how he gave more in a recent donation than the person that was sitting in front of him. He often says that when he gets to heaven God is going to need eternity just to read off all of these great things that he has accomplished.

Here's the thing. Tomorrow when we all gather around the table, we will look at each other and smile. We won't let on that deep down inside each of us is the *real* us; the *broken* us. The *us* that doesn't trust the Sunday pastor who says that God is in control, even in this time of broken government, racial divides, and injustice.

Like Uncle Jimmy we have abandoned trust in him and have resigned to the fact that this world is falling apart and hope can only be found within us. Now, it may not look exactly like Uncle Jimmy; it may not be as obvious but there is some sort of similarity for each one of us. Each of us has some insecurity, some *thing* that we believe is unique to ourselves. Some *thing* that we believe God can't help us resolve. Some thing that he just *can't* forgive. Or, even worse, some *thing* that God has *no interest* in resolving or addressing. You see, we identify that one gap in our life that is just not important enough for God to really care about.

So, we won't let go of the feelings of despair or isolation or loneliness that we cling to with all our might because we see these problems as ones that only we can resolve. We hold on to them and lie to ourselves that we can fix them without God or that we *must* fix them because God *won't*.

Tonight we read the gospel passage but if we are not careful we miss God's message to us. Most of the verses are about loving our enemies and doing good by them and asking for nothing in return. And we focus on that lesson because it consumes so much of the passage. We do the same thing in life, right? We focus on whatever takes up most of our time or money or energy. But sometimes God speaks in a much quieter voice. Sometimes the lesson is not proclaimed through many verses but stated simply through one; tonight is one such time. The very last verse simply says: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." This is the message: show mercy, *do* mercy. Just like the Father did towards you. He had every reason to withhold it from you, every reason to treat you like his enemy. He had every reason to do the same with me. He would have been justified in doing so; after all, we are the ones that turned from him, rejected and despised him.

But he showed mercy, mercy beyond measure. He loved his enemies, us. He did good by sending Jesus to the cross to pay for the sins of the world. He went to the cross for Uncle Jimmy, knowing that he would continue to turn away and try to make it on his own. He went to the cross for Grandpa Bob, thinking that his money would be more important than Christ's work. He suffered and died for David, even though David believes that his works can replace Christ's. And the list goes

on. Every person at the table has some *thing* that they can't let go of, some *thing* that they can't leave at the cross but Jesus still died for them even if they can't realize it.

And that's where we come in. *We* realize this. *We* realize our standing before God, apart from Christ. *We* realize that we are condemned to die, eternally separated from God. *We* realize that we are broken and in need of a master repairer. *We* realize that we cannot fix our problems on our own, even the ones that we know we should, but can't.

Tonight's message is about **us** gathering around the Thanksgiving table and knowing, really knowing that at that moment, at that table, with all of that angst and despair, Jesus comes. He comes to us in our brokenness, and in our anger. He comes to us in our shame, and he calls us his brothers and sisters. He comes to us with mercy. And he calls us to his table. Around *his* table we experience forgiveness and mercy and grace. Around *his* table we experience his love. And after that meal, a meal where in his grace he shows us mercy and forgiveness, he sends us out. After leaving his thanksgiving table he sends us to ours. And he asks that we show others this same mercy and grace. *His mercy and grace*. He asks me to show Uncle Jimmy that God is in control, even when the world seems to say otherwise. He asks me to show Grandpa Bob that Christ is more trustworthy than any amount of money. And he asks me to bring the message of Christ's healing to Kathy. She needs to know that he suffered and that he is there, right there, in *her* suffering. This is what he asks of me.

And for you. Tomorrow as you view your table, full of food, he asks that you remember Christ's table. Full of healing and full of mercy and love. And he asks that each one of you, me included, will fill the plates of those around us with all that he offers as well.

Let's pray

Lord Jesus,

We are reminded tonight of your endless mercy and love for us. We are so thankful for the sacrifice that you made for the forgiveness of our sins and we look forward to the feast that we will one day share with you in heaven. Lord, Isaiah wrote that you

will prepare

 a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
 the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
 the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
 from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
 from all the earth.

We long for this day. In your name we pray. Amen.