

So, I have a confession to make this morning. When I was in college I was young and dumb. Most Saturdays in the fall I spent probably 3-4 hours at the house that Paul "Bear" Bryant built. I would sit there in the student section of the stands in blistering heat, and freezing rain watching the University of Alabama play football and more often than not, get creamed by whomever they were playing. It was lean years back then, but my friends and I would go. I would make the excuse, and this is really terrible, but I would make the excuse, "I'll get my homework done tomorrow, Sunday, because on the seventh day God rested and I picked up His slack." (pause) That is a terrible thing to say. That is a blasphemous thing to think and share with others. (pause) Man oh man was I dumb. (pause) I was young and dumb. I ought to have known better. (pause) Wow! (pause) Let me ask y'all something. By a show of hands how many of y'all thought, or said, or done things when you were younger that when you look back on them you just cringe! (pause for response) Why oh why did I do something that stupid? (pause) What about today? Are there things we make excuses for today that in years to come we will look back on and think, that was really really dumb? (pause for response) Why is it when it comes to prayer, or reading our Bible, or fasting or serving others we always seem to have an excuse? We always seem to want to put it off until tomorrow. We use our freedom of choice to put off until tomorrow the very things that could give us abundant life today. (pause) Why do we do that?

Jesus told a story one time about a wealthy guy who was gonna throw a party. He sent out invitations and when the time came the wealthy man sent out his servant to let people know they were ready to have the party. Next thing you know here come the excuses. One fella said, I regret to inform you I just bought a farm. I need to go and see to it. I cannot come. Another fella said, I have bought five yoke of oxen. I have to go and check them out. I cannot come. A third person said, I just got married. I cannot come. Now y'all know it costs money to throw a party, right?. It is expensive to throw a good party. Especially back then. They didn't have paper plates and red solo cups. They had to slaughter their own animals, make all their own bread from scratch. Grow their own grapes to make their own wine. It was a lot of work! Now for the people you invited to start making excuses after all that work... I guess I can see why the wealthy man was angry.

I saw something on Facebook just the other day about this kind of thing. A frustrated momma posted on Facebook about how she had thrown a party for her son's birthday and invited all of his classmates because that's what he wanted to do for his birthday. None of the kids showed. They all had excuses. None could make it. This frustrated mother said she would never throw a child's birthday party again. She said it just isn't worth it. Instead she will find something the child really wants to do and go do that, whether it be a water park, or Carrowinds or whatever. She would rather spend the money on something her son would really enjoy instead of blowing money on a party kids would not show up to. Isn't that sad?

The wealthy man in the story did not swear off throwing parties. Instead the wealthy man decided to invite somebody else. Now all of the people the wealthy man invited at the beginning of this story could give something to the wealthy man. The guy who had bought the farm had the money to buy the farm. The guy with the five yoke of oxen had the money to buy five yoke of oxen. Let's face it getting married is not cheap, and this fella had the money to get married. Everyone of those who made excuses had the means to throw a part of their own and invite the wealthy man or repay the wealthy man in some other way. However, to confound and confuse any who might think the wealthy man threw this party for personal gain the wealthy man did something they did not expect. The wealthy man decided to invite people who could not do a thing to repay him The wealthy man sent his servant to invite the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame. These were the poorest of the poor. And you know what? There was still room in the wealthy man's house, so he sent the servant to bring in the sojourners and the homeless sleeping under the hedges. These people would never be able to repay the wealthy man for his generosity.

I have been thinking a great deal about the wealthy man and his invitations. I do not think the invitation was about social status or trying to carry favor with the rich members of his community. The invitation to this party was about the wealthy man deciding to do something nice. Which might explain why the wealthy man was so angry when those he invited started making so many excuses. Have y'all ever invited folks to something special only to have them bail at the last minute and not show up? (pause) How did that make you feel?

Now the first of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:4). Do you know why we should have no other gods before our God? (pause) Because our God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). Our jealous God loves us. God loves us so much that God sent God's only son that who so ever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). This is God's hospitality. This is God's invitation to join God's family. God first extended this hand of invitation to the Jews in Exodus 19:5-6; "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Not enough of them faithfully responded. When Jesus came to save the Jews, they arrested Jesus and treated Jesus terribly. Jesus is a Jew. Jesus is a rabbi, or teacher and they handed Jesus over to the Romans to be tortured and crucified. So like the wealthy land owner who sent out invitations and received excuses instead of guests, God invited new people. Through the Apostles, God's servants, God invited those who were not a part of the family and would have no means of paying God back. God invited all of us. God invites all of us to God's banquet feast. We share with the Jews the shame, and curse of the Fall. We also share with them through adoption in God's family the blessing of God's forgiveness and the promise of everlasting life. All we have to do is faithfully accept God's invitation.

Now in a few moments we are going to celebrate Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a means or a way God offers God's grace to everyone. You do not have to already be saved to come to God's table. You do not have to be a Christian. You do not have to be a United Methodist. We celebrate an open Communion table which means all are welcome. The invitation is to everyone; both faithful and sinner alike – even the faithful sinners. During the service the altar will be open. Now I know we are all good Methodists here, and an altar call can feel a bit foreign, but here's the deal. Here at Central the altar is always open. If you would like to come down and pray you are more than welcome to do so. During Holy Communion we have special altar call. What is different is an opportunity to respond to God's grace. Here at the Communion Table you will encounter God's grace. God's grace can hold us accountable for the things we've done wrong. God's grace will give us the strength we need to face our challenges. And if you feel led to come to God's table then it is possible that here and now this morning you just might receive God's saving grace. Our time at the altar rail is to give ourselves a moment to respond to God's grace. How will we respond?

Most of us here are not young and dumb any more. We all ought to know when God calls us how we are supposed to answer. The only question left to answer is this; will we make excuses, or will we respond like Samuel saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears" (1Sam 3:9).

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.