

By Invitation of Jesus

by Peter Marshall

Then saith he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.

Luke 14:12-14

Suppose someone in Washington living far out on Massachusetts Avenue or in Spring Valley happened one day to open a Bible and, by that mysterious process known only to angels, chanced to read these verses in the Gospel of Luke.

Suppose the reader concluded that these words, probably spoken in Aramaic so long ago beneath a Syrian sky, were just as applicable in the twentieth-century society.

Suppose that person believed that the blessings Jesus mentioned were worth having and decided to claim them. **Suppose he had the courage and the love that would be required to take Jesus at His word. What do you think would happen?**

One bitterly cold night, when Washington was covered with a blanket of snow and ice, a man sat in his home on Massachusetts Avenue.

The house was very comfortable...

A crackling log fire in the fireplace threw dancing shadows on the paneled walls.

The wind outside was moaning softly like someone in pain, and the reading lamp cast a soft warm glow on the Book this man was reading.

He was alone, for the children had gone to the Shoreham for supper and dancing, and his wife had retired early after a strenuous afternoon's bridge game.

He read the passage of Luke which is our text, and then could read no more.

Somehow he could not get away from those simple words. He had read the Bible often, for he was a good man, but never before did the words seem printed in flame.

He closed the Bible, and sat musing, conscious for the first time in his life of the challenge of Christ.

He felt as though Someone were standing behind him;
he knew he was no longer alone.

What strange fancy was this?

Why was it that he kept hearing - in a whisper - the words he had just read?

"I must be sleepy and dreamy," he thought to himself, "it is time I went to bed."

But it was long ere he fell asleep, for still the voice whispered, and still he was conscious of a Presence in the room.

He could not shake it off.

Never before had he been so challenged.

He thought of the dinners and parties that they had given in this beautiful home.

He thought of those whom he usually invited.

Most of them were listed in "Who's Who in Washington";

and there were those whose names were household names

in business

finance

clubs

and in government circles.

There were men with the power to grant political and social favors.

But they were not poor

or maimed

or lame

or blind.

What had put this absurd thought into his head anyhow?

He tried to sleep, but somehow he could not close the door of his mind to the procession that shuffled and tapped its way down the corridors of his soul.

There were beggars with trembling lips.

There were sightless eyes that stared straight in front and faces blue with cold.

There were sticks tapping on the pavement.

There were crutches that creaked with the weight of a twisted body.

As he watched them pass, he felt his own heart touched.

He whispered a prayer that if the Lord would give him courage, he would take Him at His word and do what He wanted him to do. Only then did he find peace and fall asleep.

When the morning came, his determination gave him new strength and zest for the day.

He must begin his preparations and he was impatient to go downtown.

His first call was on the engraver who knew him well.

At the counter he drafted the card he wished engraved, chuckling now and then as he wrote, his eyes shining.

The clerk who read the card looked somewhat puzzled but made no comment, although he stood watching the retreating form swing down the street.

The card read

Jesus of Nazareth
Requests the honor of your presence
at a banquet honoring
The Sons of Want
on Friday evening, in a home on Massachusetts Avenue
Cars will await you at the Central Union Mission
at six o'clock

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest."

In the engraving room, they did not know what to make of it; but the conclusion they reached was that someone had more money than sense, but that it was none of their business.

A few days later, with the cards of invitation in his hand, he walked downtown and gave them out, and within an hour there were several people wondering what could be the meaning of the card that a kindly
happy
well-dressed man
had placed in their hands.

There was the old man seated on a box trying to sell pencils; and another on the corner with a racking cough and a bundle of papers under his arms. **There was a blind man saying over and**

over to himself, "Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your presence."

A fellow who was fingering a gun in his pocket and bitterly thinking of suicide wondered whether he should wait until night.

Because he had a sense of humor, this good man called the newspapers and was connected with the writers of the society column. To them he announced the banquet that was to be given in his home that night, and asked if perhaps they would like to make mention of it or have some pictures made.

Because his name was an impressive one, because he was rich and influential in Washington business and politics, he met with an enthusiastic response.

When he was asked the names of his guests, he simply said: "I do not know their names; I have not asked them."

Somewhat puzzled, the editor of the society column laughed, thinking that he was joking, but she was even more puzzled when this man laughed and said, "If you care to come out tonight, I promise you a unique experience."

At six o'clock, a strange group of men stood waiting in the vestibule of the Central Union Mission, talking softly together.

"What is the catch in this, anyhow?" asked one cynical fellow.

"What's the game?"

"Who's throwing this feed?"

"Anybody know the bird what gave out the tickets?"

"Well, what difference does it make?"

"I'd stand almost anything for a feed."

And the blind man, with the little boy at his side, ventured to remark:

"Maybe it's part of the government relief program." And the cynic was

saying , "Aw, somebody's kiddin' us, as if we weren't wretched enough already."

Just then someone came over and announced that the cars were at the door; without a word, they went outside.

Perhaps there was something incongruous about it all, seeing these men,

clutching their thin coats tightly around their thin bodies,
huddling together, their faces pinched and wan
blue with cold and unshaven
their toes sticking out of their shoes, climbing into two
shiny limousines.

It was touching to see the lame get in, dragging one foot.

Swinging up with a twitch of pain,
and to see the blind man fumbling for the strap.

At last they were all inside and the cars glided off with the strangest and most puzzled load of passengers they had ever carried.

When they dismounted, they stood gazing at the house, its broad steps

and lamps
its thick-piled carpets.

They entered slowly, trying to take it all in.

They were met by the host, a little nervous, but smiling.

He was a quiet man, and they liked him - these guests of his whose names he did not know.

He did not say much, only, "I am so glad you came."

By and by, they were seated at the table.

They had looked at the tapestries that hung on the walls.

They had seen the illuminated pictures in their massive frames,
and the giant crystal chandelier

the concert grand piano that stood across the hall,

the spotless linen, and the gleaming silver on the table.

They were silent now; even the cynic had nothing to say. It seemed as if the banquet would be held in frozen silence.

The host rose in his place, and in a voice that trembled slightly said: "My friends, let us ask the blessing."

"If this is pleasing to Thee, O Lord, bless us as we sit around this table, and bless the food that we are about to receive.

"Bless these men. You know who they are, and what they need. And help us to do what you want us to do. Accept our thanks, in Jesus' name. Amen."

The blind man was smiling now. He turned to the man seated next to him and asked him about the host. "What does he look like?"

And so the ice was broken; conversation began to stir around the table, and soon the first course was laid.

"My friends, I hope you will enjoy the dinner. I would suggest that we waste no time, for I have no doubt that you are hungry. Go right ahead."

It was a strange party, rather fantastic in a way, thought the host, as he surveyed his guests.

There they were - men who otherwise might be still loitering on the back streets of Washington
crouched in doorways
or huddled over some watchman's fire.

What an amazing thing that he didn't even know the name of a single man!

His guests had no credentials
no social recommendations
no particular graces - so far as he could see.
But, my, they were hungry!

It was funny, as he sat there talking, how the stories in the Gospels kept coming back to him, and he could almost imagine that the house was one in Jerusalem.

It seemed to him that these men would be the very ones that Jesus would have gathered around Him - the legion of the world's wounded, the fraternity of the friendless pieces of broken human earthenware.

He remembered what the family had said...
How they had insisted on demanding, "Why? Why are you doing such a thing?"
Well, why was it, anyway?
Wasn't it plain?

His reason was the same old glorious reason that Jesus had for every miracle
for every gesture of love
for every touch of healing.
It was simply because he was sorry for these people, and because he wanted to do this one thing on an impulse of love.

Yet there was not a trace of condescension in his attitude.
He was treating them as brothers, talking to them as though they had a right to be sitting where they were.

It was a grand feeling - a great adventure.
Never before in his life had he felt this thrill.
These men could not pay him back!
What had they to give him?

He watched each plate and directed the servants with a nod or a glance.

He encouraged them to eat;

he laughed at their thinly disguised reluctance,
until they laughed too.

As he sat there, it suddenly occurred to him how different was the conversation!

There were no off-color stories, no whisperings of scandal
no one saying, "Well, I have it on good authority."

They were talking about their friends in misfortune, wishing they were here too...

wondering whether Charlie had managed to get a bed in the charity ward

whether Dick had stuck it out when he wanted to end it all,
whether the little woman with the baby had got a job.

Wasn't the steak delicious!

And they marveled that they still remembered how different foods tasted,

They wondered, most of all, who this man was, and why he had invited them all here.

When the meal was over, there was music.

Someone came in and sat down at the piano.

He began to play softly, familiar melodies, old songs;
and then in a soft, but understanding voice, he began to sing.

They listened to "Love's Old Sweet Song"

"Silver Threads Among the Gold"

and then a march by Sousa

and then "Traumerei"

and then "The Sidewalks of New York."

Someone else joined in - a cracked, wheezing voice, but it started the others.

Men who had not sung for months
men who had no reason to sing
there they were, joining in.

Now some old favorites: "Daisy"

"A Bicycle Built for Two"

"Swanee River."

Soon they began to request this and that, and before they knew it, they were singing hymns:

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

"The Church in the Wildwood"

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

The pianist stopped, and the guests grouped themselves in soft, comfortable chairs around the log fire; some of them smoked.

The host moved among them, smiling...his eyes shining. Then when he had settled himself again, and his guests were comfortable, he said:

"I know you men are wondering what all this means. I can tell you very simply. But, first, let me read you something."

He read from the Gospels stories of One who moved among the sick the outcasts

the despised and the friendless

how He healed this one

cured that one

spoke kindly words of infinite meaning to another,

how He visited the ostracized

and what He promised to all who believed in Him.

"Now I haven't done much tonight for you, but it has made me very happy to have you here in my home. I hope you have enjoyed it half as much as I have. If I have given you one evening of happiness, I

shall be forever glad to remember it, and you are under no obligation to me. This is not my party. **It is His! I have merely lent Him this house. He was your Host. He is your Friend. And He has given me the honor of speaking for Him.**

"He wants you all to have a good time.
He is sad when you are.
He hurts when you do.
He weeps when you weep.
He wants to help you, if you will let Him.

"I'm going to give each of you His Book of Instructions.
I have marked certain passages in it that you will find helpful
when you are sick and in pain
when you are lonely and discouraged
when you are blue and bitter and hopeless
and when you lose a loved one.
He will speak a message of hope and courage and faith.

"Then I shall see each one of you tomorrow where I saw you today,
and we'll have a talk together to see just how I can help you most.

"I have made arrangements for each one of you to get back to
your homes, and those who have nowhere to go, I invite to spend the
night here."

They shuffled out into the night, a different group from what they
had been.

There was a new light in their eyes
a smile where there had not been even interest before.

The blind man was smiling still, and as he stood on the
doorstep, waiting, he turned to where his host stood.

"God bless you, my friend, whoever you are."

A little wizened fellow who had not spoken all night paused to say,

"I'm going to try again, mister; there's somethin' worth livin' for."

The cynic turned back, "Mister, you're the first man who ever gave me anything. And you've given me hope."

"That is because I was doing it for Him," said the host and stood and waved good night as the cars purred off into the darkness.

When they had gone, he sat again by the fire and looked at the dying embers, until the feeling became overwhelming again that there was Someone in the room.

He could never tell anyone how he knew this, but he knew that He was smiling and that He approved. And that night, on Massachusetts Avenue, a rich man smiled in his sleep.

And one who stood in the shadows smiled too, because some of the least of these had been treated like brothers for His sake.

Of course, that never happened.

It is only a piece of imagination.

But why shouldn't it happen, on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington?

on Park Avenue in New York?

in Druid Hills in Atlanta?

on the Gold Coast in Chicago?

in Beverly Hills in Los Angeles?

I wonder what would happen if we all agreed to read one of the Gospels, until we came to a place that told us to do something, then went out to do it, and only after we had done it...began reading again?

Why don't we do what Jesus says?

How exciting life would become were we to begin living according to His way of life!

Friends would say we had lost our minds - perhaps.
Acquaintances would say we were "peculiar."
Those who dislike us would say we were crazy.

But Someone Else, who had these same things said about Him, would smile, and the joy and peace in our own hearts would tell us who was right.

There are aspects of the Gospel that are puzzling and difficult to understand.

But our problems are not centered around the things we don't understand, but rather in the things we do understand, the things we could not possibly misunderstand.

This, after all, is but an illustration of the fact that our problem is not so much that we don't know what we should do.

We know perfectly well...but we don't want to do it.