

“The Table in The Wilderness”

Introduction: Having officiated many weddings over the years has not only provided me the opportunity to be present at a very significant moment in a couple’s life, it has also enabled me to experience dozens of different caterers through the parties and receptions that follow the wedding ceremony. Vinwood, Chive, and Jalapenos have been three of my favorites. Recently, I’ve learned that my favorite pizza place, Flatbread, is now catering weddings so I’m keeping my eye out for them! The only real horror story I’ve heard is from a couple we know that said their caterer just didn’t show up! Can you imagine that? One hundred hungry wedding guests ready and anxious to eat, and no food. A mother of the bride’s greatest nightmare!! Sounds a bit like the nightmare of the disciples of Jesus when he asked them to feed 5,000 men and their families with five loaves of bread and two fish!

We began looking at this text last week where we see Jesus catering a kind of party or reception, spreading, if you will, a table in the wilderness. We considered how Jesus used this party to train his followers about their participation in the mission of God, bearing witness to the Kingdom of God in word and in deed, and trusting in God’s power to accomplish his mission through us. Today we want to notice that Luke sandwiches this party between two sets of questions, questions that wonder about the identity of Jesus. The first set comes from Herod: “Could this one I’ve been hearing about be John the Baptist raised from the dead, or Elijah, or one of the prophets from long ago come back to life? Who is this man...?” wonders Herod. The second set of questions comes after the feeding, from the lips of Jesus, “Who do people say I am?” and the same three options are given. But when Jesus presses his disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter declares, “You are the Messiah.”

As Luke has structured this chapter, we move from Herod’s question to Peter’s answer, through this party in the wilderness. How can we know that Jesus is the One, the Messiah, God’s promised Savior-King who has come to liberate God’s people from sin and death and bring healing and restoration to the world? Jesus’ identity, it seems, is revealed through his catering. As we prepare to respond to Jesus’ invitation to share at his table, let’s unpack for a bit what the table he spread in the wilderness says about who he is.

From Questions to Answer

A. The questions that were raised in King Herod’s mind came as reports flowed in as to what Jesus, as well as his followers, had been up to in recent months. Not only were they proclaiming that in Jesus, the Kingdom of God had begun to break into the kingdom of this world, but this proclamation was being accompanied by all sorts of miraculous deeds. As Luke narrates in chapters 4 - 9:6, sick people had been healed, demons had been exorcised, storms had been stilled, and even the dead had been raised. What was going on? Who is this guy who is behind all of this? Herod was dying to see.

B. Then we move to the feeding in the wilderness, a party that provides the crucial clue as to who Jesus is for those with eyes to see. Part of the clue arises from three OT pictures that come into view with this feeding in which Jesus recreates images from Israel’s past and fulfills them.

1. The first is from Exodus 16 and God’s provision of manna, a bread-like substance, to sustain his people as they traveled through the wilderness. God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, but the journey to the Promised Land was not an easy one. The people grew hungry

and began to grumble. They grudgingly acknowledged that God had provided them with water, but then they wondered about food: “Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?” (Ps. 78:19). Well we see that indeed he can. “I will rain down bread from heaven for you,” God informed their leader Moses (Ex. 16:14), and the manna began to appear, new and fresh, enough for each day. In the wilderness outside of Bethsaida, Jesus looks up to heaven and the needed bread is provided. Could he be leading a new kind of exodus for God’s people, this time from the slavery of sin and death?

2. The second picture that comes into view in this episode was another miracle of multiplication that God had provided through the prophet Elijah. A group of 100 prophets needed feeding. Elijah had access to 20 loaves of barley bread (these were personal-sized loaves, and same kind of bread, incidentally, that the disciples of Jesus had been able to come up with, Jn. 6:9) and told his servant to feed the prophets with these. But like the disciples, Elijah’s servant protested: “How can I set this before a hundred men?” Elijah answered: “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: *They will eat and have some left over.* Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD” (2 Kings 4:42-44). Jesus, like Elijah, provides for God’s people, and with leftovers!

3. But a third picture highlights even more. It suggests that Jesus is the host of a feast known as the Messianic Banquet. This party is pictured by the prophet Isaiah, who proclaimed this promise from God:

On this mountain, the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain, he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever... In that day they will say, “This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” [Isa. 25:6-9]

This is a picture of God’s new creation. It is a feast and time of fellowship no one need leave. Death is on the menu, but the LORD, God’s Messiah, the host, not the guests, will swallow it up. He defeats death, puts the world back together, and enables us to enjoy God’s presence for an eternity, as the leftovers imply. Through this table in the wilderness, Jesus points to the great, future party he will be catering.

II. The Clashing Kingdoms of Herod and Jesus

A. But what about now? I should mention that there have been many attempts to explain away this miraculous feeding of the 5,000. Perhaps the most popular is the suggestion that when Jesus made everyone sit down and held up what little the disciples had given him, it moved others to produce food they had brought but had kept hidden because they didn’t really want to share it. If we’d just be willing to not be so greedy, the world could be a better place, it is concluded. Well, I’m all for sharing, and the world would be better off if we did so more generously. We could easily craft a national health care plan that provided for the needs of all! But this feeding is not simply about sharing, nor are the three OT pictures we’ve seen that sit in the background about sharing. In fact, it’s not really possible to share well with others unless one has experienced the way Jesus has shared his life with us. True sharing involves a change of heart, not a dose of guilt! We give generously only because we’ve received the abundant grace of God. Only when we have received grace can we truly extend it. And these feedings are all about God’s gracious giving, ultimately through Jesus, trusting God completely to provide where and when we cannot. They are about Jesus, the bread of

life, rescuing us through his death, and teaching us to live in his kingdom, with meaning and purpose, through his life.

B. And that is important because there is another kingdom out there with which the kingdom of God exists in sharp contrast, the kingdom of this world, a kingdom that would have us live in a different way. It is represented by Herod. The back story on him, as recorded in Mark, is a lavish birthday party he threw for himself. The guest list was the top 2%, a real who's who - his high government officials, the top military commanders, and the leading citizens of Galilee (Mk. 6:21). Following much merrymaking, including an erotic birthday dance by his stepdaughter, Herod was manipulated to into having John the Baptist beheaded! Herod, we see, welcomed the in-crowd and shunned the poor. He is motivated by pride and self-interest, and enslaved by what others thought of him. His party ends in death. By contrast, the party Jesus throws in the wilderness, and many others he attended, welcomes all. The poor are present. He even eats, the in-crowd sneers, with tax collectors and sinners. He is motivated by compassion and humility, and the need to live sacrificially for others. His party ends with life.

C. Now, how much of all this did Peter know when he answered Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?" with the declaration, "You are the Messiah sent from God!" Well, Peter didn't yet get it all. He would still stumble over Jesus' claim that the Messiah needed to die to bring about our liberation. But the object lesson of the feeding seemed to help Peter begin to connect the dots to where he could see Jesus as God's promised Savior-King. He could at least perceive the difference in the party Herod threw and that which Jesus catered.

So as we come to the table Jesus has set for us this morning, the one he catered by giving up his flesh for the life of the world (Jn. 6:51), may the bread and the cup be a means by which we can intimately recognize and encounter the grace and generosity of God.