

Series: POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE - February 15, 2009

**THE INCREDIBLE PARTY...THAT NOBODY WANTED!
Luke 14:15-24**

I. INTRO

- A. **THERE'S PROBABLY NO GOD. NOW, STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE!** How many of you have either seen or heard about this bus ad in London—now coming to Toronto? Know what part of that slogan I find most troubling? The part that says, ...**stop worrying and enjoy your life!**

-Know what that makes me wonder? What have people who love and believe deeply in God communicated about Him to others? That He's some Cosmic Stalker—watching your every move and keeping score—ready to fry you in your driveway. Anxious to get His hands on all the people who don't believe in Him—and some who do—and dangle them like a spider over a blowtorch. That to really **enjoy** your life, you have to leave Him off the guest list.

1. And you know what's even **more** crazy about that kind of thinking? We believe that God stepped onto this planet 2000 years ago, and when He did, He surprised **everyone**. And the ones who typically hated him most were the most religious.

-Know who **loved** Him? The agnostics, the party-goers, the scoundrels, the pimps, the prostitutes! Not because He was one of them—but because He was scandalously accepting and loving.

2. How many of you love a great party? Did you know that **Jesus** loved parties, too? In fact, a number of his stories and illustrations centered around them. He went to parties—and the super-religious called him a drunkard and glutton—that culture's version of a **party animal!**
3. Can I get something off my chest here? You don't mind, do you—don't worry, it's not about you! I **hate** the portrayal of Jesus followers that I sometimes see that paints them in tones of brown, gray and black—accompanied by organ music. I hate depictions of Heaven that make it this quiet, lonely gold-plated place—accompanied by choirs singing classical music! Quietly, of course, lest they wake God up! He's old—needs his rest!

- B. The question is not, "Why don't **they** get it?" It's "why don't **we** get it? That God's favorite music isn't Handel, Bach, or Bill and Gloria Gaither? That God's favorite facial expression isn't the blank stare—it's surprised joy! That God's favorite human expression is laughter—and tears of gratitude. That God's favorite TV program would probably not be religious broadcasting; it would be something like **Extreme Home Make-Overs**.

-That God didn't just create lambs—He created platypuses, giraffes, and chimpanzees! That God is younger and more playful than we are; that if we listened carefully—we could probably hear His hearty laughs and shouts of joy ringing through

the universe. That God loves His **best** gifts; friendship, laughter, color, sex, beauty, great food, good wine—and a **great** joke!

-If **Jesus** loved and attended and talked about parties, what does that say about God? I'll tell you what it means—at least in my heart. Right now, God isn't building golden streets, golden buildings—or golden arches. He's planning a party that will last for eternity. And Jesus' secret message was...***It's already started—and YOU'VE been invited!***

II. YOU VOTED FOR THE **WRONG** PARTY!

- A. Jesus was at his best telling stories—and did a lot of it. Typically these stories have been called **parables** down through the years. A parable, by the way, is a story with a purpose; a point. Interesting—that at **least** two of his parables were based on parties—or feasts/banquets.

-Religious types in our world would probably focus on people's **behavior** at these parties—you know, who was wearing the lampshade on their head, or dancing on the table. But in both stories—Jesus focused on who was invited, but wouldn't come. Let's read Jesus' story from Luke 14:

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, “What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God!” Jesus replied with this story: “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I now have a wife, so I can’t come.’

“The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ After the servant had done this, he reported, ‘There is still room for more.’ So his master said, ‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.’” (Luke 14:15-24 NLT)

1. The words, **Hearing this...** tips us off that **something** has gone on before that sparked both this guy's exclamation and the parable Jesus gave. Jesus is, once again, in the middle of a messy situation.

-The problem started when he got invited to the home of a leader of the Pharisees after synagogue one Sabbath. But it was a set up. They'd invited a man afflicted with terrible swelling in his joints to see if Jesus would heal him. He did—and embarrassed them by telling them how **strange** it was that they would pull a cow out of a ditch on the Sabbath—but not heal a fellow human being.

2. These dinners were **huge** social events—and usually attended by a bunch of spectators. So all the guests were jockeying for position—seeing who

could get the best seats. Jesus, who has more courage than me—**called** them on it. He said, “Why don’t you just take the humblest seat—and let the **host** exalt you? You’ll look pretty stupid and arrogant if they have to move you to the back of the line for a more important guest! **Don’t promote yourself!** Sting number two!

3. But Jesus, by now, is on a roll. He takes on the host, the biggest ego at the table—the leading Pharisee. He says, “Why have you invited all the important people—people you are friends with—or **want** to be friends with? This is tit-for-tat stuff—not hospitality. When you throw a party—if you want

God’s blessing and reward on it—**invite the people who never get invited!**

“Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.” (Luke 14:13-14 NLT)

4. The temperature in the room must’ve been soaring! What’s cool is that they didn’t really invite Jesus **to** lunch; Jesus **was** their lunch! They were going to roast him and carve him up like a Christmas turkey! But they didn’t know who they were dealing with. People never do.

-When I read stuff like this, I think, “Jesus, you could’ve used a **little** more tact!” Why does Jesus sometimes appear, well...**rude**? I’ll tell you why. Jesus is going to die within weeks—and **He was their last chance!** Religion and Bible knowledge and prestige had turned their hearts and egos to steel. And the only way Jesus could penetrate the armor was with words that blasted through the armor. What’s worse is that these people with screwed up ideas about God were leading **thousands** of others over the cliff, too.

-Believe it or not, Jesus **loved** these guys just as much as he loved Peter, John, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, and Zaccheus. Their **only** hope was an intervention; “I love you, but your **eternity** is on the line, and I will **not** stand by and play your games with you!”

B. So, do you get the picture of the **awkwardness** at this party? I’m using my imagination here—but I’m guessing that the silence hung thick in the air. A couple of coughs; people clearing their throats. Some relentless person smacking his lips over the leg of lamb and mint jelly.

-I also imagine some big pompous old guy using his “God” voice—and breaking the silence with something he thought was **really** spiritual; “Just think! When the **Messiah** shows up and sets things up right—now won’t **that** be a party to be attend!” And **then** Jesus tells his story.

1. It’s a story about banquets and parties—of all things. According to the custom of that day the host would send out an invitation to all the guests—usually the important people of the town, basically telling them what day the party would be held and inviting them to come.

-Then massive preparations would start. This banquet Jesus is describing would be on the proportions of a massive Middle Eastern wedding reception. This is not about buying heating up a few frozen hors d'oeuvres from M&M Meats. This was about growing, fattening, butchering, baking, crushing grapes and aging wine. To give you an idea of how big these occasions were, Jesus was once at a wedding where they ran out of wine—to he took the water pots and made more. 120 **gallons** of the stuff!

-When the feast was ready, **then** the host would send a servant out to invite all the guests to come. These feasts were a **big deal** in that culture. And they weren't these wimpy little 3 hour things we do; some, particularly wedding receptions, lasted for a week. I've been to some receptions that **seemed** that long—but were actually only a few hours.

2. The **surprise** in Jesus' story comes in the rudeness of the guests who were initially invited. They apparently had RSVPed "**yes.**" But when the feast was finally ready and it was time to shower, floss their teeth, powder their wigs, spackle the cracks and put on the robes with the stiff collars, they said, "Uhhhhh, sorry. Can't make it! Send my regrets to the host." To make matters worse, they come up with all these stupid excuses. You know the difference, don't you, between an **excuse** and a **reason**. Jesus lists some:

-One person said, "Uhhh, sorry—but, gee, I **just** bought a field and need to inspect it!" How many of you would buy a house, or a business—sight unseen? Not unless you're a few tacos short of the full combo platter.

-The next is no better. "Man, I **just** bought five teams of oxen—and I need to try them out!" That's the equivalent of five new John Deere tractors. Know how much a new John Deere tractor costs? \$75k for your basic flashing blue-light special to over \$300k. "I just bought five—**now** I need to go make sure they actually **work!**" This guy must think the host is as stupid as a sack of hammers!

-The final excuse is just as bizarre. "I **now** have a wife—so, sorry, I can't come." Why? Here's a thought—**bring her!**

3. Well, the person planning this party/banquet is furious. Take a shot in the dark and guess **why?** It's because what they've done is a **huge** insult. This host has gone to a **lot** of trouble—shown unbelievable generosity—and they've flipped him off. Thrown it all in his face.

-So, he send his servants out into the streets and alleys to invite **anyone** who will come. Suddenly the guest list includes the disreputable; the despised; the people who have been shoved off the margins of the culture because of their disabilities and needs and brokenness. But there's **still** room at this party! So the servant gets sent out into the countryside—you know, to Punxsutawney, Timmons. Where you know a guy's married if there's snuff stains on **both** sides of the pick-up. The implication is that foreigners were invited in—people who didn't even know or participate in the Jewish customs of cleanliness and dress and etiquette.

-Then the final thought; “Those I originally invited won’t even get a **taste** of this banquet; they’ll only smell the prime rib on the BBQ!”

C. If you thought things were a little awkward before at that party, they are **very** awkward now. See, the people sitting around this table shoved their way to the front of the line at parties here—because they thought they would **surely** be guests of honor—head table material--at God’s big final Kingdom party. What Jesus said with this story is, “Don’t get **too** excited about God’s big party because, from what I’ve seen, you’ve pretty much rejected the invitation. See, you can’t stand me, **I AM** the invitation!”

1. They had God at their party, and they sneered at him for healing a man in pain. In fact, God wasn’t at all impressed with their performance and rule-keeping and knowledge. He comes to our hearts looking for love and grace and tenderness—and what He sometimes finds is arrogance and coldness and hardness.
2. And they didn’t realize that the sick guy they’d invited to their party as a **prop**—to skewer Jesus—would be the kind of person sitting at the head table in the one feast they **so** wanted—but, if the trajectory never changed, would probably miss.

-In fact, according to Jesus’ story, the people welcomed into the joy and laughter and eternal celebration of this amazing party God throws—would probably **never** get invited to one of theirs. The outsiders. People who have been warehoused, ignored, marginalized and avoided. The invitation to this party would be known as **grace**—all the good things God longs to give **every** human He’s ever made. Things never deserved, but freely and extravagantly given. And **that’s** why it’s called...**Amazing Grace**. But sometimes grace is flat out rejected.

III. PRIDE, EXCUSES AND STICKING POINTS

A. A few weeks ago, I watched a different sort of worship service on TV. Unlike most services, people planned for this gathering **months** in advance. This church has a much different liturgy than ours. When things get **real** exciting, they stand and yell—and sometimes throw things. A **full** range of emotion at this church, from anger and frustration—to absolute ecstasy—to **awe!** In fact, paramedics and ambulances are standing by—because sometimes their worship is so extreme, there are casualties. -I sometimes throw fudge; at this church they will either bring you food—or you can go to the lobby and buy it—pretty much anything you want. Out in the parking lot of this church, people start to gather and party way before worship officially begins. And when church is over—people—at least some of them—take their party to the streets. The pre-parties are called **tailgate** parties; the post-parties are called **disturbing the peace**. People become totally unhinged in the presence of the deities. Of course, I didn’t mind—because my all-time favorite team was leading worship that day. The Pittsburgh Steelers.

1. Now, imagine if I had had the opportunity to be in the stands with all those other crazy, bean-eater Steeler fans on Feb. 1. You have a choice under those circumstances—to either join the party—or not join the party. What if you

don't? What if you just sit in the stands with your arms crossed—or texting friends with your cellphone? Would the cheering stop if you don't participate? Would people stop buying hot dogs and pizza and nachos and pop? My guess is that the party would continue **without** you. Even if you didn't approve—even if you didn't like the other guests!

-You go to the wedding—you hear the music, see the decorations, read the program. You watch groom and his buds step out; and all the bridesmaids walking in step down the aisle like pigeons. Then there's this pregnant pause—actually it's not **good** to have a pregnant pause at a wedding. But I digress. Then someone stands—the **mother of the bride**—everyone turns—and **there she is**. The **Bride!** So you...**stand!** What if you **didn't** stand or turn? Would the bride still come? Would the others still stand and gasp and cry?

2. Here's my point—and there **is** a point. This story Jesus told is about a party—a party God is putting on. It's a **big** party! No one knew when Jesus first told this story, but it had **already** started. The goodness and kindness and life and joy and peace and grace and **wise leadership** of God had already come. Jesus said it like this; "The **kingdom of God** is here! Right now! Right under your noses!"

-Parties, at heart, are relational in nature. They're characterized by joy, dancing, celebration, wine—or, if it's a Baptist party, red punch. But parties are basically about enjoying your friends—and meeting new people. If it's a good party, there's usually a **lot** of laughter—and no one wants it to end.

3. Most parties have a theme of some kind. We just did a birthday party for our daughter, Selina. And this was a party to celebrate entrance into the teenage years. The Steelers party was a Super bowl **VICTORY** party. -Well, this party God's throwing, inaugurated by Jesus, is also a **VICTORY** party. Sin, death, the ugly underside of this world—with all its sadness and disease is on its way out. The one behind all this sadness, the Devil, has been defeated—and **he knows it!** In this party, **love wins**—not hate or apathy. Good wins, not evil. In **this** party, the people who have had to suffer, who've limped around, or felt their way around, or been warehoused with other diseased people—win. Health wins—cancer, heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, MS and AIDS ultimately lose.

-In this party, the poor, the starving, the people who've struggled with addiction and brokenness and depression and mental health issues—finally win. The self-assured; the arrogant; those who have walked on the backs of the suffering; those who have climbed over top of the people they consider losers—lose in their quest to get ahead.

4. The party has started already. It's pretty low key right now—somewhat underground, but like any good party, the volume and energy and momentum will continue to build; more and more people will come—and it will just keep rockin'—until one day, **one day** the Guest of Honor, the One who started the

party, is going to show up. Let me just say—as good as things can get, you and I **ain't seen nothin' yet!**

-**You've** been invited to this party. Just as you are. And the question Jesus asks you—right this **very** moment—is--will you **come?**

- B. I want you to notice who Jesus is dealing with here—because they're a bunch of party-poopers. Do you know what a **party-pooper is?** They're people who find ways to sabotage parties; throw cold water on joy and life and love and kindness and fun. Think about the people at the party Jesus found himself at.

-Whoever ran this party, from all appearances, invited a sick man—and man in pain—as a kind of **prop** to nail Jesus. What kind of person does that? Sounds mean to me. And what kind of people come to a party to strut their stuff—try to push their way to the front to brown-nose the host and impress the guests? And what kind of host only invites people who can return the favor and ignores those he considers to be losers?

-Can you understand why Jesus went after these people—fresh from a **wonderful** sermon at the synagogue? They had missed the point of their faith—and were dreadfully close to missing God's party. And even though these people seem to be mean and proud and self-pre-occupied, Jesus **love** them. He doesn't want **anyone** to miss the party! Even party poopers!

1. Let's be real clear about something. This party, started by Jesus, is about **grace**. Anyone know what grace is? We sometimes talk about justice—we love justice. We **want** justice. Someone speeds by us, forces us to swerve—man, we want—no **DESERVE justice!** We want to see flashing red lights speed by and give them a \$200 fine—put them in their place!

-What about when **you're** in a hurry, you know, coming to church, and the flashing red lights are behind you? How many of you want justice **then?** You want mercy.

-When the flashing red lights are on **top** of the vehicle you're in—it's an ambulance and you're in deep trouble because of something stupid you did, you don't want justice; you don't even want mercy, because you're **getting** mercy. You want **grace**. You want something you can't get for yourself in that moment. Help. A second chance. A way back. A fresh shot. **Grace**, friends, is the most beautiful thing in the world.

2. See, Satan's the ultimate party pooper. His goal has been to trash the **grace party** Jesus came to give. To do this, he trashes God's reputation. Think about it; he turns **God** into the sourpuss; the cosmic killjoy; the great accountant in the sky—just a keepin' score all the time. That may be the **religion** party; but that's not **God's** party. God's party is about forgiveness. About learning to really, **really** live. It's about being a part of a community that genuinely loves and accepts. It's about people who don't for a minute deserve it—but get a second chance in life.

-In fact, it goes deeper; it's about people who have lost **all their lives**—winning the biggest jackpot. It's about prostitutes who've sold their bodies **hundreds**—

maybe thousands of times—becoming pure again. It’s about people without influence or education or social skills or status of any kind making a profound difference in this world.

-It’s about people who have a **lot** getting the biggest kick in life in giving what they have to others; it’s about people who are well-educated and sought-after and well-spoken—find that their most meaningful moments come in serving the poor; caring for those who can’t care for themselves.

-God’s party—is taking the whole status-seeking, money-making, arrogant, star-studded, stacked, Oscar-driven, red-carpet, twisted world system we live in—and flipping it **right-side-up**. **That’s** why Jesus says, in this story, that the One throwing the party is walking through the city streets, looking in alleys and behind garbage cans—and headed down the road to where only the **outsiders** live—and **bringing them in! All of them. Anyone who will come. People who think they have NO place in this magnificent party.** “Hey, you...and you. And **you too!** Want to have the party of your life? Are you sick of eating out of garbage cans—and drinking leftover wine out of old bottles? Come find **life!** And then give **your** life away to bring others!”

3. But some who have been invited **won’t come**. And instead of saying why not, or at least being honest--make excuses. The excuses actually fall into three categories in Jesus story.

*The first—“I just bought some property and need to inspect it.” Well, that represents something that takes up a lot of time and energy in our world. Buying stuff—and taking care of it. Right?

*The second—“I just bought five teams of oxen and need to try them out.” What do you think that represents? “Man, I’m busy! Work just has me by the throat! They can’t do without me, you know. I don’t have **time** for that stuff right now.”

*The third—“Well, I’ve just married me a little woman!!” Doesn’t quite say that—but it’s our relational world. “The guy I’m **totally** in love with, see, he wouldn’t go for that; ...the friends I hang with, well, they’re into a different **sort** of party...”

-I’m not so concerned with what the excuses are in this story. I just wonder what the **real** reason is that people don’t want, won’t take—the **opportunity of a lifetime—an eternity, really!** Has anyone here ever made an excuse and bowed out of a party? What’s the **real** reason? Isn’t it usually that you think that it’s not going to be worth the time and energy? You’ll be bored. You’ll get shunned or put down. Or—maybe—you can’t stand the person holding it! Or you’re **afraid** of the person holding it.

4. And that brings us full circle. Remember the bus ad? **There’s probably no God. Now, stop worrying and enjoy life.** Somehow God has been **deeply** mis-represented. Slandered. Jesus revealed God as a Father who knows how

many hairs we have—who knows and cares when we hurt. He’s the God of all peace—who can calm any storm in our hearts. He’s the God of all grace—who welcomes anyone, everyone—with open arms. He’s the God of all hope—hope for our past, our present and our future. He’s all powerful—and also the most loving Being—so loving He would send His Son as a sacrifice to reverse all the evil and reclaim everything—including every person who will come to Him.

-In the very next chapter of this book, Luke, Jesus tells the stories of the lost coin, and the lost sheep—and talks about how all Heaven rejoices—throws a party--when **one** lost person is found. Then He tells one of his most memorable stories. You think it’s about the lost Son—and how the Father waits for him to come home, runs to greet him, and then throws a **party to end all parties**. But you realize that the story isn’t really about the younger son; it’s about a cranky older son who **refuses** to come to the party. He can’t **stand** his younger brother—and he can’t **stand** what the Father has done for him. The story ends with him sitting outside the party—fuming; sulking.

-I’m convinced that some of the meanest, angriest people in the world are religious people. Quite self-righteous, thinking **they** deserve the party; that God should be honored to have them at the head table—and **really** angry that the God of all would invite **losers** to their party. And they miss the party because, see, they have believed the lie too—that if you have **religion**, you don’t **need** grace.

5. The invitation stands. You’re invited to the party. Will you come...or not. It’s possible, this morning, that you have some honest sticking points. You’ve got some learning...and thinking to do. Maybe you’re a little afraid—or checking the price-tag. Maybe you need to do some investigation to see whether this is all true. Do it!

-But it’s **also** possible this morning that you are making excuses—and have been for some time. It’s possible that you have believed the liar of all liars when it comes to the Father’s love. You’ve believed that Jesus suckers people in so He can trap them, steal their fun—and keep them from the **fun** parties!

-It’s possible that you’ve somehow believed the lie that your job, or your money, or your success, or your friends—something is going to give you a bigger party than **God** can give. And you’re free to try all those things—you really are.

-It’s possible that you’ve somehow believed the lie that God asks us to clean up our act, get our stuff together, quit our bad habits, change our lives before we come. The point of grace is that we **can’t**; we need power beyond ourselves. So we come **just as we are**—and God accepts us.

-It’s possible that you’ve been watching sour, joyless religious people too long who seem to find most of their enjoyment judging others. And you think, “I don’t want that!” And God would say, “Funny! **I** don’t want that either!”

6. And I want to ask—is it possible—**is it possible**—that you have excused yourself from a party that will bring more joy and more life and more power than you can ever imagine. A party that is going to just keep getting more powerful—and bringing more peace than this old world thinks is even possible?

IV. DON'T MISS THE PARTY

- A. Philip Yancey has a great story about this in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* It's a story about a very unusual wedding banquet--reported in the Boston Globe.

-Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal. The two of them pored over the menu, made selections of china and silver, pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked.

-They both had expensive tastes and the bill came to \$13,000. After leaving a check for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home to flip through wedding announcement books. The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailbox, the potential groom got cold feet. "I'm not sure," he said. "This is a big commitment. Let's think about this a little longer." He bailed. He dumped his fiancée.

-When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the events manager could not have been more understanding. "The same thing happened to me, honey," she said. She told the story of her own broken engagement, but about the refund, she had only bad news. "The contract is binding. You're only entitled to \$1300 back. You have two options: forfeit the rest of the down payment or go ahead with the banquet. I'm sorry, I really am."

-It seems crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party. Not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blowout. Ten years before this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had gotten back on her feet, found a good job, set aside a sizeable nest egg. Now she had the crazy idea of using her savings to treat the down and out of Boston to a night on the town.

-So it was that June of 1990 that the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken "in honor of the groom," she said, and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served appetizers, hors d'oeuvres, to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers.

-Bag ladies, vagrants and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the streets outside and instead drank champagne and ate chocolate cake and danced to big band melodies late into the night.

- B. That's **God's** kind of party! Two questions for you to take home as we close: First—who do you invite to **your** parties? Who do you eat with—and does it include those Jesus is **passionate** about including.

-Second. Have you **ever** accepted the invitation to Jesus' grace party? Choose wisely, cause this is the party of a lifetime—and way, **WAY more!**