

'NO EXCESSIVE BARKING': A Chevy Chase dog park divides the rich and powerful.¹

I was immediately intrigued by the headline from the Washington Post this week. It began:

"Everyone knows there's a problem with Chubbs.

Dirt is smeared across his face. His tongue is rolling out of his mouth. He's surrounded by signs that say "NO EXCESSIVE BARKING."

But the 5-month-old golden retriever does not know how to read. At a dog park in one of Maryland's wealthiest suburbs, he spends this sunny August morning rolling on his back. He opens his mouth, and then, he does it.

He woofs. Twice.

"CHUBBS!" four humans around him yell, trying to stop him from doing what dogs do — just not in Chevy Chase Village this summer.

Here in this community of the rich and powerful, where the average household income is \$460,000, barking is the subject of a [fur-ocious?] debate — one that has divided the two-legged one-percenters for nearly a year."

Sometimes I miss life in the beltway. Never a dull moment! These sorts of articles are a consolation.

The dog park in the midst of this swanky neighborhood was unanimously approved. And yet, just a couple months into it's creation, tension has erupted with multiple calls to the police every day over excessive dog barking. The community hired an epidemiologist to study and research the comings and goings of who used the park. Seriously. Lawsuits have been threatened. High-powered lawyers have consulted other high-powered lawyers.

One resident said, "...there are people, and I don't mean to characterize the District, but I just notice that they have District plates on their cars, and they have very little regard for us or our property . . . there are dogs barking and they're just not doing anything."

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Social etiquette. It can be tricky.

Many commentaries refer to this encounter, this parable, as something along the lines of: Lessons in Kingdom Etiquette.

At first glance, it seems like Jesus is giving sage advice. Don't position yourself where you might end up being embarrassed. But he takes it a step further. He admonishes those at the dinner gathering not to take into account the social reward of their invitations and hospitality. Do not invite your friends and those who already respect you, do not invite your rich neighbors, hoping to receive the same hospitality in kind.

Instead, Jesus implores those gathered, those who listen and hear, to invite the outcast...the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind...the socially undesirable. These are not simply the undesirable, for instance, maybe the worthy poor. Jesus is challenging both the social and the religious conventions, suggesting reaching out to those who are unworthy, unclean, untouchable.

Jesus seems to be a pretty terrible guest. Rude, disturbing, offensive even.

But what we are missing today is context. We skipped a few verses of chapter 14 in which Jesus heals a man with dropsy (today, probably known as edema). And again, it is a healing on the sabbath...the 4th healing on the sabbath in Luke.

The context for this teaching of Jesus is healing.

Jesus has turned towards Jerusalem, headed towards the cross, issues warnings, implores vigilance for the kingdom and the arrival of the presence of God among us. He is healing, literally setting people free from sickness and bondage. And he looks to those he gathers with and says, "Who is missing? Who needs healing? Who needs to be set free? Who is not at the table? Who does not have a seat?"

To use banquet imagery is to call to mind the Kingdom of God, the reign of God that is to come, the kingdom that is breaking into the world.

So when Jesus starts talking about inviting people to a banquet, he is painting a picture larger than that immediate dinner gathering at which he sits. He is casting a vision for healing and reconciliation that will draw the whole world to God.

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At a personal and practical level, Jesus continues to model for us a life centered on inviting into the presence of God those who seem to neither expect nor deserve such an invitation. And Jesus expects, compels us even, to do the same.

Jesus expects us to stop counting the costs, rewards, and benefits of our actions. Jesus expects to stop seeing our relationships as a means towards rewards, a vehicle for benefits. And instead, Jesus invites us to live from a posture of abundance and blessing.

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Counting. Who is in. Who is out. Who belongs. Who does not.

Counting...it is so present, omnipresent even, that we almost forget it exists. We probably don't even recognize the toll it takes on our lives. The ripples and repercussions counting causes.

Our culture and society, the world in general, drives a general anxiety: We live with a sure conviction that there is not enough. Not enough money, not enough time, not enough prestige, not enough power, not enough resources, not enough recognition, ...not enough (*fill in the blank*).

I'm currently reading a book by David Zahl called "Seculosity." [secular + religiosity = seculosity]

The subtitle is a great intro: "How career, parenting, technology, food, politics, and romance became our new religion and what to do about it."

All the national polls, from Pew to Gallup, tell us that church attendance is declining, that religious affiliation is plummeting, but what these polls fail to report is that the marketplace for replacement religion is *booming*. Zahl writes: "We may be sleeping in on Sunday morning in greater numbers, but we've never been more pious. Religious observance hasn't faded apace 'secularization' so much as migrated – and we've got the anxiety to prove it. We're seldom *not* in church."²

Whatever our religion, we rely upon it for things like meaning and hope. We also rely on religion for enoughness.

We scramble to be successful enough, happy enough, thin enough, wealthy enough, influential enough, desired enough, charitable enough, woke enough, good enough. "We believe instinctively that, were we to reach some benchmark in our minds, then value, vindication, and love would be ours – that if we got enough, we would be enough."

But what if we found a seat at a table for which there was enough? ...for which there was more than enough for you and me and the next person, for each and every person?

What if our seat at the table told us that we were enough? ...that you are enough?

What difference would it make for our peace of mind, collectively and individually?

What difference would it make in how we treated others, how we looked at others?

"What if we saw others not as competitors for scarce resources but as partners, even siblings, commissioned by God to distribute the riches of God's goodness and grace?"³

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Now look, it is easy to laugh at the ultra-wealthy and mock their conflict over barking dogs and who uses a public park in the midst of their neighborhood.

But the truth is we all wrestle with enoughness, prestige, how we relate to one another, and what it means for our own enoughness.

Zahl points out, and I agree, that the objects of our secularity – food, romance, education, work, technology, politics, and so on – are not bad, in of themselves. Quite the opposite – they are, by and large, fine and good. “It’s only when we lean on these things for enoughness, when we co-opt them for our self-justification or make them into arbiters of salvation itself, that they turn toxic.”

Last week, when Jesus healed the woman, he said to her, “Woman, you are set free...”

To experience and know God’s healing is to be set free.

To have a seat at God’s banquet table is freedom.

Freedom to know we are enough. [Claimed and marked as God’s own, we are enough.]

Freedom from the anxiety that comes with calculating prestige and enoughness.

Freedom to be kind, loving, and gracious to everyone around us, particularly those who are not often the recipients of kindness, love, and grace.

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What does it look like to invite people into the healing grace of God? What does it look like to invite people to sit at God’s banquet table and, ultimately, experience the enoughness of God? At work, at school, in your community/neighborhood, at social gatherings, sporting events/practices...What does it look like to make room in our lives for those who need God’s grace?

Jesus encourages us to be ever vigilant with the guest list for the banquet. Proper etiquette, according to the kingdom of God, is to be sure that everyone has a seat at the table.

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The goal, I think, might be to see life in the kingdom, much like Chubbs, that 5-month-old golden retriever, sees life: Wide open, no reservations, present to the moment, no worries,...and joyful.... Unconcerned about expectations, unburdened of constraints, free of the worries about what other people think... Barking loudly, joyfully, calling others to experience that same healing joy and zeal for life.

My friends, you are enough.

Stop counting.

Stop counting and pull up a chair at God’s banquet table.

Stop counting and experience the deep joy of God’s healing.

Stop counting and give to others the fullness of life, grace, and love.

Stop counting and share the abundant gifts of God’s grace, dignity and worth with which we have been blessed.

¹ <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/local/no-excessive-barking-a-chevy-chase-dog-park-divides-the-rich-and-powerful/2019/08/27/0b9fd242-c4e5->
² Zahl, David. *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, And Romance Become Our New Religion And What To Do About It*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. Page xii,
³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-15-c-freedom-to-stop-counting-and-start-blessing/>