

The *New York Times Magazine* carried an amusing piece called *Artful Alibis* several years ago. It was a compilation from news sources of the flimsy excuses people offer to justify themselves. Here is a sampling:

- In Ft. Myers, FL, a man explained why he had stolen a 12 oz. steak: he was going into the restaurant business.
- In Knoxville, TN, a man explained that he couldn't report to his probation officer because his children had cut his probation papers into paper dolls.
- Held as a burglary suspect after police found him turning the door locks of the rectory of a Pittsburgh church with an assortment of 25 keys, a 67 year old ex-convict told officers, "I was just looking for a place to pray."
- And, in Las Vegas, NV, a man arrested for illegal possession of 4 boxes of morphine told police he was trying to sell them in order to pay his way through Bible college.

Strange and extreme as it may seem, there's a little bit of us in each of these. Each of us has an alibi-ridden life. The persons who had been invited to the great banquet in Jesus' parable wanted to be in other places so they made excuses.

The heavenly banquet is an image in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. It is often used to describe the bliss of the good time coming when God's reign is revealed. Jesus was trying to tell people that the banquet is already set, here and now. The feast is on and many people are missing the festivities because they have excuses. Jesus used this parable to say that the chief requirement for participation in the feast – here and now and in the days to come – is to throw away excuses and accept the invitation. Consider with me the way excuses interfere with the life that God is offering us.

Excuses conceal rather than reveal the truth. There is a difference between an excuse and a reason. When we wish to explain something, we give a reason. A reason is based on factual evidence. But when we wish to conceal, we make an excuse. An excuse covers up the factual evidence. One person said he couldn't attend the banquet because he had bought a piece of land and wanted to go see it. Do you suppose he was in the habit of buying land sight unseen? How long could he stay in the real estate business if that were his practice? Another had bought 5 yoke of oxen and wanted to go prove them. Can you imagine an old fashioned stock trader buying stock without knowing their value? Yet another person had married a wife and asked to be excused from the banquet. I have heard of people who are so in love that they lose their appetites, but hardly supposed it was to be a permanent condition. The truth is that none of them wanted to attend the banquet. Their excuses were designed to conceal the truth. Have we not all been guilty of this type of alibi? When it comes to faith's banquet, excuses are keeping people shut off from an exciting party. Excuses always seek to conceal rather than reveal the truth.

Excuses also blame exterior circumstances rather than inner motives. On the lowest level, the desire to escape responsibility for one's own moral failure expresses itself by emphasis on luck. It is said that successful people get lucky breaks while those who fail are victims of bad luck. We do not deny that luck is a factor in human experience, but history is star-studded with unlucky people who have been eminently

successful. The determining element in life is not what happens to people but the way they respond to what happens.

Biography is filled with illustrations of this reality. In almost all outstanding lives, one finds grand excuses for quitting – Milton’s blindness, Beethoven’s deafness, Pastuer’s paralysis, Robert Louis Stevenson’s tuberculosis. Glenn Cunningham was so badly burned as a boy in a schoolhouse fire that the doctors said he would never walk again. But the day came when he faced world competition in the Olympic mile and set a record for running it in 4 minutes and 4/10 seconds. He won the race in spite of bad luck because of his magnificent response to misfortune.

And we have no right to say that bad luck ensures failure when we know that good luck does not guarantee success. St. Peter and Judas sat at the feet of Jesus, heard the same words he spoke, and saw the same deeds. George Washington and Benedict Arnold lived in essentially the same environment. Washington chose to invest his life in one way and Arnold in another. Two brothers grew up in the same household, attended the same schools, and had the same social and economic advantages. One became a respected businessman and the other became a cheat and a scoundrel. You recognize the point: the denial of anyone of any power over his or her life and destiny reduces that person to a helpless cog in an impersonal cosmic machine. We were designed to be co-creators with God and the stewards of creation, not victims of it. We are created by God just a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor and endowed with the capacity to decide how to respond to whatever life hands us. We cannot determine our heredity and our environment is largely determined for us. But our response to these given elements of life is our own affair. Our interior motives are far more significant in faithful living than any exterior circumstances.

Finally, excuses promote weakness rather than strength. The first great poet of history was Homer. As poets do, he recorded the indescribable in an unforgettable way. But what a perfect excuse he could have had. He was born blind. Yet he saw and described what he saw as no other person of his day. Homer preferred strength to weakness, so he threw away his good excuse.

The world has been immeasurably enriched by the genius of Steve Jobs. He had some great excuses. As an infant, he was given up for adoption. The people who were supposed to adopt him decided after he was born that they really wanted a girl, so they rejected him. He was adopted by a loving working class people who promised to provide him with a college education, but he dropped out during his first year. Two years later, he and his friend founded Apple. He could have chosen weakness rather than strength, but he didn’t.

We as individuals and as a congregation have plenty of good excuses to justify our slowness to commit ourselves to the life of faithful stewardship of the bounty God has entrusted to us and the glorious life to which God calls us in our Baptism. But by the grace of God, we know we have the freedom to throw away those excuses and come to the festivities. Today is our annual Commitment Sunday. You all knew I would get around to this, didn’t you? I have spoken to congregations like you sitting in pews like these for forty years and I am more enthusiastic about doing it every year. That’s because I believe helping people have a healthy relationship with their possessions is vitally important. Over half of the sayings of Jesus had to do with possessions. That’s because Jesus knew that our possessions are the most likely things in our lives to interfere with our relationship with God, with our neighbors, and with our own spiritual identity and destiny.

Long ago, Gay and I decided to tithe as a spiritual discipline to help us remember that all of it belongs to God and we as humans have the wonderful privilege to be stewards of what has been entrusted to us. No

other creature has that vocation. This year, we have plenty of good excuses; our house in Texas has not sold after two-and-a-half years on the market, Gay retired last year and that reduced our income, we made a pledge to the organ campaign – the list goes on. By increasing our pledge, we have added a reminder to throw away our excuses so we can do our part to help advance God’s mission through the Church of the Good Shepherd.

And, let me assure you that your rector nominating committee is about to interview some exceptional candidates who are being considered for a call to this parish. Those candidates have already been looking at the record of giving and mission of this church. They teach us how to do that in rector school. They will be watching to see how you continue the momentum during the transition. One of their questions of the committee will quite likely be, “How is the stewardship campaign going this fall?” Next spring, you’ll want to welcome a new rector who will jump on board a moving train and together pursue the next era of mission.

What are your good excuses? I am aware of many of mine and of my daily struggle with them. Are your excuses holding you back and keeping you from becoming the kind of person you and God really want you to be? From reaching the goals you want to reach? From having the kind of faithful and spiritual life you so deeply desire? Is there a day any better than today to throw away those good excuses and replace them with the robe of righteousness that is handed placed by God on those who are invited to the banquet, the new state of being that Jesus called “The Kingdom of God?”