

Sunday October 15th, 2017
Proper 23

PRAYER: God of creation, we thank you for the earth that receives our plantings and for the sun and rain that bring them to glorious flower. Lord of life, we thank you for the people who reap this harvest and turn it into food for our bodies. Spirit of love, we thank you for our communion with you, which kindles our joy in creation and stirs affection for one another. Come into our presence now that we might commune with you and you with us. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Blessed be your name, O Lord of heaven and earth, for your reign is marked by sovereign goodness and gentle power. You rule your creation with such firmness that we stand in awe of your great majesty. Yet you treat us, your mere creatures, with such respect and love we can only marvel at your patience. We praise you for your mighty power. In you we renew our confidence in the face of all the turmoil this life throws at us. Your power renews our hope the justice will eventually triumph. Yet we also rejoice at the restraint with which you use your power. For this world deserves judgment on a scale that the likes of Noah experienced but you offer instead forgiveness.

We wish, dear God that we did not have to ask for your forgiveness, but only for your justice. Yet we know we could never survive your just judgment of us. We have sinned with our minds; we have entertained thoughts that serve no good purpose. We have sinned with our hands; we have wrought deeds that have worked much mischief. We have sinned with our lips; we have spoken words that we should not have spoken, and we have left needed words unspoken. We have sinned with our hearts; we have not loved you with all our being, and we have not loved our neighbour as our selves.

For all our sins, O God, we ask your forgiveness. Remove them from us as far as the East is from the West. And renew in us such an awareness of your presence that we can no more let go of you than you can let go of us.

The world in which you have placed us is full of trouble and challenge. Grant us the ability to see its possibilities and the courage to bring them into being. Where there is despair, let us kindle hope. Where there is oppression, let us bring justice. Where there is pessimism, let us awaken faith. Where there is violence, let us wage peace. Help us, O God, in this world torn by strife and bitterness, to experience and spread the joy of seeing your will done on earth as in heaven.

We thank you for the summons to become labourers in your vineyard. As we take up this task, let our labour become an instrument for recruiting other labourers to your vineyard.

BENEDICTION: When we entered this sanctuary, O God, we brought vivid memories of your gifts for which we are thankful. As we leave, let us be equally thankful for the opportunities for service awaiting us in the world. Grant us the humility so as to express our gratitude that others will praise God and neighbour, in word and deed. Amen.

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Matthew 22:1-14

“Come to the Party”

I thought, that now hopefully, the last of the turkey has been used up from last weekend, it is now time for an injection of some culture, so please relax as I share with you this moving poetic tribute to Thanksgiving.

*‘Twas the night of Thanksgiving, but I just couldn’t sleep.
I tried counting backwards, I tried counting sheep.
The leftovers beckoned-the dark meat and white,
But I fought the temptation with all of my might.
Tossing and turning with anticipation,
The thought of a snack became infatuation.
So, I raced to the kitchen, flung open the door
And gazed at the fridge, full of goodies galore.
I gobbled up turkey and buttered potatoes,
pickles and carrots, beans and tomatoes.
I felt myself swelling so plump and so round,
‘Til all of a sudden, I rose off the ground.
I crashed through the ceiling, floating into the sky
With a mouthful of pudding and a handful of pie!
But, I managed to yell as I soared past the trees,
“Happy eating to all-pass the cranberries, please!” (Treasury of Humor)*

Ah, Thanksgiving, a feast and festival, celebrating family, friends, and all things related to gluttony. Thanksgiving; tables loaded with turkey, gravy, potatoes, stuffing, veggies and of course *yum, yum, yum*, pumpkin pie. Now I realize that some of our fellow Canadians and even perhaps members of our church family can find this whole Thanksgiving thing a bit foreign, especially if you come from a culture where this very English custom of eating a big roasted bird is out of place.

The good news is, however, that even if Thanksgiving is a foreign concept to you, all cultures know what banquets, and feasts, are all about. The reasons for celebrating and the type of food may change, but a feast is a feast. This is especially true of a wedding feast. I know of no culture anywhere in the world that chooses to have a time of fasting to go with a wedding; instead all cultures opt for a wedding feast.

So, isn’t it interesting that Jesus compares our relationship with God to a wedding feast, and not just any wedding feast, but a huge celebration of a King whose son was getting married? Think of a Palestinian version of Prince William and Kate’s wedding. Jesus is saying then that the Kingdom of God is one great big celebratory party. I am pretty sure that this may come as a surprise to some people, who behave both in words, and in attitude, that the Kingdom of God is more like a funeral.

Lowell Streiker reveals this when he writes about his wife who was asked to host the monthly meeting of the women’s fellowship.

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Instead of their planned discussion of world missions, the ladies spent most of the time chatting about their arthritic aches. They dwelt on their pains, their children's or grandchildren's tonsils and adenoids, and their husband's enlarged prostates, slipped discs, and weak hearts. When his wife returned home, he asked her how the meeting had gone. "Well," she said, "It wasn't so much a study of missions as an organ recital!"

We need to pay close attention to the fact that Jesus doesn't paint a picture of God's kingdom as being a collection of people beaten down by life. Instead, he talks about a banquet, a great big party. What also may surprise you to learn, is that this parable isn't symbolic of heaven. The parable was never intended to encourage people to look forward to dying, and then going to heaven.

This parable is the last of three parables (two of which we have already explored) that were addressed to the Pharisees, and speak symbolically of the nature of the Christian life here on earth. The Christian life is an invitation to joy and excitement and celebration. And again, this seems so counter to what we experience so often in our faith journey.

The purpose of this parable, is to ensure that we experience life with God as a party, not as the Pharisees did; as a burden or a funeral. To the Pharisees faith was work, onerous and demanded piety and sober reflection. In fact, one of the reasons they despised Jesus was that those who came to him seemed so happy. Jesus' presence lifted the spirits of everyone. Remember Palm Sunday?

However, when it comes to God's invitation to join this grand celebration, we are, as the Pharisees were, our own worst enemy. The parable talks to us about how we deliberately miss out of the fullness of the joy offered to us. In fact, there is more than one way you can miss out on the best offer you will ever receive in your life.

The parable reveals three ways we reject God's offer. The first way we miss the banquet, is by being apathetic. When the king sent out his wonderful invitation, verse 5 tells us that people ignored the invitation. Some went off to work in their fields, others to business opportunities. They simply paid no attention to what was being offered to them. They just don't hear God's offer, and respond, because they don't care to listen.

Their lives are focused more on worldly matters; like work, or accumulating possessions. They would rather choose to focus, and find meaning for their lives in the mundane aspects of life. It is no wonder that King Solomon despaired in Ecclesiastes 2:17-23.

"So now I hate life because everything done here under the sun is so irrational. Everything is meaningless, like chasing the wind...So what do people get for all their hard work? Their days of labour are filled with pain and grief; even at night they cannot rest. It is all utterly meaningless."

Still others respond to God with hostility. Verse six states that the king's servants were seized and some were mistreated and some killed. It is hard to fathom this level of hostility. It is akin to a friend inviting us for dinner, and we slug them for it.

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No excuse given just hostility. You get invited to this amazing party where you can eat and drink all you want, and not pay a dime; and some people respond by killing the messenger. Another way of stating this is to say that some people respond to God's invitation by becoming belligerent.

Belligerent means being openly hostile and aggressive. One of the things that churches do from time to time is send out a mailing to their community to describe what programs offered by that particular church. Rev. Steve May's church sent a mailing out 15,000 with invitations to their church. In the following few weeks about 100 people who received the brochure actually tried coming to church.

That means 14,900 decided not to come to church. What is interesting though, Rev. May writes; is that about half a dozen people actually called the church to complain about receiving the brochure. Some angrily complained that they never wanted to hear from the church again, and further stated that they are against everything the church stands for. These few who took the time to call were very hostile.

"But it makes you wonder", Rev. May writes, "Whether when they get a flyer from radio Shack do they also call their head office and raise Cain? Probably not."

Another person reports that he works in a factory, and one night he left his bible in the break room, and when he went back to get it he found that someone had thrown it into the garbage. Do you think they would have done that with any other book? Probably not. Some people do respond to the invitation of God to the banquet, with anger and resentment. It is hard for us to understand this.

Maybe, they respond this way because they have had a bad experience with religion. Maybe they met a preacher they didn't like, or went to a religious school where they had their knuckles rapped. Maybe they went to church one time, and the people were not friendly. Who really knows? All we know is that God offers a life of joy and peace, and some people only respond with anger.

Then there are people who are simply uncooperative. This is the part of the parable that our modern ears may not fully appreciate. The king's servants had brought in all kinds of people to the feast, but one man was not wearing wedding clothes. The king asked the man how he got into the feast dressed the way he was. The man had no answer, so the king ordered his servants to bind him up and throw him outside, into the darkness.

What do you think this means? This guy gets invited to the wedding at the last minute, and then gets tossed out for not wearing his tuxedo. It hardly seems fair. Actually, did you know that some strict Christians have used this verse to try and prove men should wear suits, or ladies' dresses, on Sundays when they go to church? They argue that if we don't wear our "Sunday Best" or our "Sunday go to meeting clothes" God doesn't want us at church. But that's not the point Jesus is making at all.

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In Jesus' day it was the common practice for the host of the banquet to actually provide wedding clothes for the guests. It is kind of like when you go to a fancy restaurant where it says that men have to wear a dinner jacket. You arrive at this restaurant without one, and they may have some spare jackets lying around they loan you to wear for your dinner. So, this is not the case of a man who was too poor to own nice clothes to wear; rather it's a case of a proud man who wouldn't show proper respect.

Yes, he came to the banquet, but he wasn't willing to cooperate. He came to the banquet wearing working clothes, not wedding clothes. He wanted to come to the feast, but didn't want to fully commit to the process. It still happens today. It is how so many people miss out on God's purpose for their lives. Yes, they come to church every week, but they never really engage themselves in God's kingdom.

On the surface their lives can look quite respectable. They may be the ones who wear the suits or dresses. Maybe they serve on church or charitable boards, maybe they have lots of Christian books and music on their shelves, but their hearts are far from God. They simply are not serious about fully committing to the party God is offering them. This is a serious issue for those running ministries in this church and other churches as well.

We can spend enormous amounts of time trying innovative things to draw people into church circles, only to discover that they will only go so far. People may join a church softball team, send their kids to our programs, join a drama group, or choirs, but their interest in God never goes beyond the appetizer that initially drew them in. Too many people are attracted to the services offered by a church, but never commit to taking in the whole banquet. It can be enormously frustrating to ministry leaders, but it is a fact of life.

Now I realize today that I may not be talking to some people who are apathetic or are hostile to God, but I bet I am speaking to some who fall into category three. People who want to come to the banquet, but don't want to put on the wedding clothes. You want to attend, but you do not want to cooperate, and you don't want to commit. In so doing, you are rejecting God's invitation, and you are missing out on God's purpose for your life.

Symbolically, wearing the wedding clothes means; approaching God with a spirit of reverence, a spirit of respect, a spirit of cooperation, and a spirit of commitment. You are saying to God, "God, I want to be on your team and I am going to be a team player." There is more than one way to miss out on the banquet, but there is only one way to get in: with a full-on, no holds-barred commitment to God.

There is something else very beautiful in this parable I want you to see. Did you notice that the call of God on your life is not based on your past? When people would not respond to the king's invitation he widened the scope of the invitation. "Go to the street corners and invite people you find. So, the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."

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Did you notice that? Both Good and Bad! The old saying is true, “The church is not a museum for saints, but is a hospital for sinners.” When we open the doors of this place and the hearts of this community, we do not say, “All of the holy people, all the righteous people, all the good people welcome here-and no one else.” No! Not at all! When we open the doors and hearts of this community we say, “Everyone is welcome. It doesn’t matter who you are. We will receive you and God will receive you.”

God extends his gracious invitation to the highways and byways-to those whose clothes may not be completely clean. Why? Because once you come to the banquet, he will clean you up and he will put fine new clothes on you. Some people may think, “It’s too late for me. I’ve messed up too much. God will never have anything to do with me now.” Don’t you dare believe that! Nothing could be further from the truth. God issues his invitation to all-the good and the bad.

If you are not clean, he will make you clean. If you are not worthy, he will make you worthy. The fact is, none of us is worthy-we all need his grace. Finally, I need to tell you that your response to God’s call determines your future. In other words, it is entirely up to you. Your place at the banquet can only be filled when you decide to come and participate fully.

So how will you respond: with apathy or with passion, with hostility or joy, with a non-cooperative attitude or with a no-holds barred level of commitment?

Our King has issued his invitation to his banquet. Your past doesn’t matter, but your future certainly does, and your future is determined by the decision you make, even today, about God’s invitation.