

17 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23 – Year A – October 9, 2011
Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
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“Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables” (Matthew 22:1). We continue this week with more of Jesus’ teaching from the Temple. Without skipping a beat, Jesus expands on his original response to the question of His authority and identity. Once more Jesus challenges us to consider our own unbelief, and our own rejection of God’s grace, freely given to all who come to Him in faith. Beyond the traditional interpretation of this parable, and its immediate context of judgment there is something more. It’s so integral to God’s free gift of grace, and our life in Christ that we might even overlook it. Yet it’s woven carefully into *this* story, and the whole history of salvation. It’s a characteristic of God, a mysterious fruit of the Spirit available to all, and a foundational element of our life in faith. You and I are constantly invited to the participate with joy in God’s kingdom, and to be a part of a marriage made in heaven.

The opening lines of the story offer good news, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” Like the recent marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton, royal weddings hold a strange fascination for us. Many of us watched in excited anticipation, and enjoyed the beauty of the liturgy. A family wedding is exciting, but a royal wedding is for everyone, a point brought home in the inclusiveness of the royal feast in the parable. God, the king, instructs His servants to “invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet”. As God’s servants, our joyous mission is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, inviting everyone we meet to the feast. That is *everyone* we meet. Not just the folks we like, or people *we* judge worthy, or acceptable. God says everyone is invited.

In fact, the kingdom of God is already here, mysteriously mixed into the whole of creation. As other parables tell us, it is like a pinch of yeast. The kingdom as present now leavens the good dough, so that the hungry are fed, and Christ’s mission of reconciliation continues. The kingdom is also the yeast that reveals the bad apples, as they spoil or waste away. We celebrate the foretaste of the joyous Messianic banquet at Holy Eucharist. The good and the bad are all part of God’s kingdom now. There’s nothing and nobody outside of God’s grace. The earth and all that is in it belongs to God. Yet we still have the ability to reject God’s gift of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life in Christ. There will always be those who do so, as we hear in today’s parable. However, only at the last judgment, will God determine who is appropriately dressed for the occasion, and who is not. Only God is our judge. This is good news for all who know and love Christ. We can celebrate, because we’re already clothed in righteousness, ready for the wedding feast of the Lamb. Our robes are a gift of God’s grace through our faith in Jesus. We can’t make our robes any finer than they already are. We can’t buy a robe at any store, or for any price. We can’t earn the right to wear it. It’s ours because God has given it to us as a free gift of His grace, by virtue of His Son, Jesus Christ. It is pure joy to be so blessed. The strange thing is that we so often don’t reflect that joy in the moments of our lives.

If we have lost a sense of exultation and joy in being loved and accepted just as we are, because of what Christ has done for us, then it’s time to reclaim it, and to live joyfully. Joy is another facet of our freedom in Christ. Those who make light of the invitation to come to the king’s banquet for His son are rejecting the joy offered to them, and choosing the world instead. At one level, they scorn joy by turning down an invitation to the unending feast, where all who are hungry will be filled. The leaders who reject the invitation are unworthy partly because they should know better. They’re the teachers of Israel, experts on Scripture. Isaiah and Ezekiel both speak of feasting as a sign of God’s triumph over His enemies (Isaiah 25:6, and Ezekiel 39:17). Given their deep connection with God as the covenant people, the leaders who reject God’s gift should also know that there’s nothing more important than our relationship with God. When the king calls us to a wedding feast, we don’t suddenly decide that there’s something more important to do at home, the farm, or at work. All who’ve experienced a sense of God’s call – anything from responding in faith, engaging in ministry, to sharing the Good News – know how difficult it is to refuse God’s invitation. In many ways, once God has a grip on us, He will not let go easily. When we pray, “Thy

will be done” God takes us at our word. In this story, the king’s response is either a prophetic warning of judgment, or an interpretative account of God’s judgment on Jerusalem. Remember that Matthew’s Gospel was written after that cataclysmic destruction of the Temple by Rome in 70 A.D.

Rejecting God’s invitation to feast in joy, shrugging off God’s constant coming into our hearts and our lives, is to hold God’s gift in contempt. If we reject His free and unmerited gift because we think we can earn our salvation, we are also turning away from the joy of kingdom living today. In effect, rejecting forgiveness by God’s grace in favor of a life dictated by, and therefore judged by the Law, is pure foolishness. It’s akin to exchanging certain hope, eternal life, joy and freedom in Christ, for anxious toil, worthless trinkets, darkness, and a living death. Sadly, it means missing out on the abundance of real life, living in a false self-centered reality. The illusion is so powerful it makes us feel like we’re riding around in a Cadillac, only to discover that we’re skateboarding in darkness, a long way from the Light of Christ. There’s a certain similarity for those who accept the gift of faith, but never fully respond to the Lord with joy and gratitude in this life. We wear the robe of righteousness and will be welcomed at the feast, but we still miss out on many of the joys of life in Christ. While we’re busy worrying and fussing over trying to look good, or at least better than the person next to us, or doing the right thing out of a sense of duty, we forgot the pure and unadulterated joy of simply being loved by God. It’s a kind of selective amnesia that blocks our ability to love and worship the Lord in all the circumstances of our lives. It often means that we fritter away the blessing of time seeking earthly accolades and worldly success, when simple, and joy-filled faith offer eternal and rich rewards. Thomas G. Long doesn’t pull any punches when he writes, “to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not conform one’s life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar.” There is a better way. It’s found in responding to God’s love and grace with joy and gratitude, as well as through faithful discipleship, and the sharing of our gifts.

Since the story tells of the good and bad filling God’s banquet halls, who is the “friend” without a wedding robe? Who refuses to acknowledge or respond to the king’s question, the speechless one? He or she has spent their life making a lavish robe for themselves. He or she is so full of self that they have distained a relationship with God, and even standing face to face with their creator, thumb their nose at the invitation to be reconciled. As Martin Luther says, they choose “this [garment of] outer darkness ...in contrast with the inner light, since faith alone must [shine] within the heart.” So in God’s grace and mercy, those who live a joyless life, outside of Christ’s love and forgiveness, find themselves alone in their darkness. It’s said, “Hell is just a courtesy for those who insist they want no part of forgiveness” (Robert Farrar Capon). For you and me, our greatest joy in life comes in responding to the Lord with grateful thanks in all things. Our joy grows in giving Him our whole self. As Henry van Dyke so eloquently wrote, “Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away; Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!”

Amen.