

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 15, 2023 – The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
The Parable of the Wedding Banquet; Matthew 22:1-14
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, is the third of a set of parables that Jesus told to the religious authorities in Jerusalem shortly before his crucifixion. The first was the Parable of the Two Sons. A father asked each of his sons to go to work in his vineyard. One said he would work, but didn't. The other said he wouldn't, but did. Clearly, the second son had done the will of his father. The message of this parable is straightforward. It is doing the work of God's kingdom that counts.

The next parable in the set is the one we considered last week, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. This parable is more complex, an allegory. God is the landowner who places his vineyard – Israel – in the hands of tenants – religious leaders – who behave badly. They reject God's messengers, the prophets, who try to set them straight, and they even kill the landowner's son, Jesus. These wicked tenants deserve God's punishment for their terrible deeds as well as for their failure to lead and teach God's people in God's ways. The religious leaders hearing this parable understood that it referred to them. They were not pleased.

This morning's Parable of the Wedding Banquet is also an allegory. To understand its meaning we need to do some "translating" of terms. The king is God, and his son is Jesus. The marriage feast refers to the Book of Revelation and the great marriage feast of the Lamb of God – Christ – at the end of time. The slaves are the prophets and the people invited are the people of Israel, God's chosen people. Some of those invited hurt and killed the prophets, and so Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

After this, God expands the mission field to include everyone, including the Gentiles or non-Jewish people. Now everyone is invited to the banquet. The wedding hall is the church, comprised of both Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Matthew's day, and comprised of both good and bad people, in Matthew's day and our own.

What about the guest who was not wearing a wedding robe? The king's anger seems excessive. We need to understand that this isn't about being casually dressed at a formal party. The wedding robe is a symbol of the Christian life and represents putting on the baptismal garment of Christ. We need to understand this at its deepest level, far beyond participating in a church ritual and wearing a white robe of baptism. In this parable wearing the wedding robe means transformation into God's own likeness, clothing oneself with the compassion, kindness, humility, and patience that are the traits of people who belong to God's kingdom. The garment here is not an outward garment that can be put on and taken off, like the vestments that we wear during our worship services. The wedding robe is an outward sign of the person within – a person fit for the wedding banquet of Christ at the end of time, or not.

The last line of this morning's lesson has been interpreted in several ways. "For many are called, but few are chosen." In the history of the church Calvinists have used this verse to support the theological concept of predestination. Simply put, this means that God has decided ahead of time who will and who will not be saved. This is not what we believe in the Episcopal Church. I am convinced, given all of Jesus' teaching as well as the witness of much of the rest of Holy Scripture, that the sense of this verse in Matthew might be clearer if the verse read, "For many are called, but few answer the call."

Let's go back in the parable and look at the responses of some of the people who refused to attend God's banquet, a sumptuous banquet with fatted calves. The people "made light of [the invitation] and went away, one to his farm, another to his business." These people failed to take God's invitation seriously, to understand its importance. So, they went to work. They didn't go off, like the younger son in The Parable of the Prodigal Son, to waste themselves and their resources in "riotous living." They went to work. They were busy making a living. Nothing wrong with that, except that they wasted the opportunity God had offered them. They missed the sumptuous banquet. They took themselves out of the wedding hall by their own choice. Jesus teaches over and over again that answering the call to the kingdom of God is more important than anything else.

We are here in the church because we have received an invitation from God, an invitation to follow Jesus and to become fit for the wedding banquet of Christ at the end of time, through God's mercy and grace. How will we reply to God's invitation? As individuals and as a parish.

Let's imagine for a moment that God's invitation has just arrived. Each one of us has just received a beautiful card in the mail at home. It reads, "God invites you to follow God's son Jesus as you live each day of the rest of your life. If, with all your heart, you choose to accept this invitation, your days may not be free of trouble, but you will know love, joy, and a peace which only God can give. You will find time to help your neighbors, to pray for them, and to work with others who have accepted God's invitation to assist the poor and needy. You will grow in compassion and generosity and gentleness. The light of Christ will surround you, and at the end of your life on earth, you will be with God forever. R.S.V.P. at your earliest convenience."

And what if another beautiful card came to St. Columba's, addressed to all our members. It reads, "All of you have received a personal invitation from God. If you were able to say "yes" to that invitation, God now invites you to join with others who have said "yes" to God's invitation, to meet together, to pray together, to help one another, to follow Jesus, to decide how to do what he would like you to do. With this invitation comes God's promise to help you and guide you and strengthen you, so that this group might be like no other group you belong to. R.S.V.P. at your earliest convenience."

God has issued these invitations, not by engraved cards through the U.S. mail. But often and in many ways, God invites each of us and all of us. God invites us every Sunday morning as we join in the Eucharist. The invitation is serious, not something to make light of and go away to our work and other activities.

Each time we say "yes" to God – each time we listen for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit and follow her guidance; each time we choose to love in spite of the temptation to be contemptuous or mean; each time we ask our Lord to guide us and we follow him – each time we say "yes" to God in any of the innumerable opportunities offered to us, we are working on that beautiful wedding robe God has asked us to create, according to God's own design. Shall we get to work? For deep in our souls, don't we long, more than all else, to be welcomed guests at the wedding banquet of the Lord? Amen.