

**Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time/October 12, 2014**

**Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14;**

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*"The Invitation"*

The parable of the wedding banquet.

Another one of those tough parables by Jesus. Actually, this is the third teaching by Jesus in the Temple since his arrival in Jerusalem. Remember, he enters Jerusalem on a donkey, on Palm Sunday, receiving a hero's welcome. It is a parade, or perhaps more accurately, a demonstration against the powers that be, the Roman authority there in Jerusalem.

Then he goes straight to the Temple, the center of Jewish worship. There he upsets the business of those trying to sell animals for sacrifice, the money changers who provide the correct currency for those who do not have it, and causes a real disturbance in the fine-tuned machine called the Temple worship. You may recall this as the *"Cleansing of the Temple."*

Then he comes back the next day and has the nerve to return to the Temple and begins teaching to the people. As he so often did, he tells parables. Here in the Temple, he tells 3 parables. They are all parables of judgment.

The first, of the 2 Sons who are asked to go and work in the vineyard by their father. The first says he will not go, but later repents and goes and works. The second says he will go, but does not. Jesus uses this story to condemn the religious authorities who did not listen to John the Baptist and instead lifts up the sinners, the harlots and the tax collectors, who believed in John and what he said.

Next Jesus tells the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Here a landowner has a vineyard that he rents out. But when it comes time to collect the produce, the tenants beat, stone and even kill the messengers he has sent. Finally he sends his son, whom they seize, throw him out of the vineyard and then kill. Jesus asks his listeners what they think the landowner will do? They say he will *"put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time."* Their words condemn themselves, as Jesus points out that they, the leaders of the Jewish faith, have failed to do God's will, have failed to produce the fruits of the kingdom of God, and so it will be taken away from them and given to others who will produce that fruit.

Then we have today's parable, the parable of the Wedding Banquet, which sounds like it should be a happier, nicer story. However, it turns out that those invited to the wedding of the king's son, chose not to come. In fact, like in the previous parable, they mistreat the messengers who were sent to remind them of the banquet, and even kill them. The king is enraged and sends troops to destroy those who murdered his servants and levels their city. He then instructs other messengers to go out and find anyone and everyone they can, both good and bad, to come to his banquet.

What we have here is Jesus' ongoing duel with the Pharisees and religious leaders. He is a reformer, a revolutionary, and he is seeking to stimulate a change in his religion, a turning back, a returning to God, just as all the prophets in Israel's history tried to do.

Thus these words of judgment. We need to be careful however, not to see these words as judgment of the Jewish people, a great mistake that has been made by the Christian Church at various times throughout history. Jesus himself was Jewish and so were all who followed him. But his calling was to widen the understanding of who God's people were, beginning with those who understood themselves as the chosen, the elect, of God, and reaching out to all people everywhere, all of humanity.

These parables however, are about more than judgment. They are also about invitation. And that's really what I want to talk about today.

In the parable of the Wedding Banquet, the invitation is first given to some but they find reasons to ignore it, reasons to not respond. There is a little song that captures this well.

*"I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray hold me excused, I cannot come!"*

It is a mistake to be so caught up in our own ego-driven, self-centered agendas, that we ignore or put off the invitation of God. Of course, that invitation is then extended to all, those on the highways and byways, and it is no select group, it includes both the *good* and the *bad* who are invited! That's pretty amazing isn't it? God's realm is accessible and available to all!

The invitation of God, to enter banquet, the kingdom/kin-dom of God, the realm or family of God, the invitation to become part of that atmosphere of God's love and compassion, is universal. It is what we in the church call Grace. The understanding, that God reaches out to us, offering what the psalmists so often referred to as *"God's steadfast love which endures forever."* John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement in the 18th century called it *"Prevenient Grace."* That before we do anything to merit or to earn it, God's love is given to us, regardless of who we are or where we are from, regardless of anything. God's love is given. Period.

In the United Church of Christ, we speak about *"Extravagant Welcome"* and how that is not only a feature of God's Spirit, inviting us all in, but also a characteristic of who we are to be as God's people, opening our doors, our hearts, to all who might enter, so that we might all be one.

But that *Prevenient Grace* is just the beginning. What we do with it, what we do with the invitation, is what comes next. And that's what I think that funny little ending to the parable is about. That part where the guy who is found at the banquet without a wedding robe, gets bound, hand and foot and tossed out into the outer darkness, *"where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Apparently, when we get to that banquet, we are supposed to get or have a wedding robe. Now some, like John Calvin, have thought that this robe signifies "election", that God's Grace is given only to a select number of those who have been chosen before the world was even made, and it is only those who will be "saved."

Now, obviously that's contrary to what Wesley, Luther and some others thought. For them, perhaps the robe signified what you did, how your life changed, what your attitude was like, the position of your heart, once you accepted that invitation. The danger in this perspective is the suggestion that one can earn their way into the kingdom, and thus begins the "faith vs. works" argument (which we are not going to get into today).

However, our good friend Paul, may be helpful to us here. In his letter to the church in Philippi, he seeks to bring some who have been separated by some disagreement, back together, for they have both worked with him in the spread of the gospel and he loves them both. And here we have these wonderful words from him, *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

I love these words that speak to the kind of people we are to be. But there is one short sentence that jumps out at me. After his plea to rejoice, and to let your gentleness be known, he says, *"The Lord is near."* That seems so much like Jesus' own words *"The kingdom/realm of God is at hand"* it is *"near."* This thing that we are invited to, is right here! It is not far away, it is not in some distant time, it is here, right here, right now. It is like an *invisible threshold* we just need to walk through, if we would only choose to.

Finally, there is just one other part to this that we cannot ignore. In the parable, we readily identify with those who are given the invitation. And we are happy, even thankful for that. But what about the servants, the slaves, the messengers who are sent out to deliver the invitations. Those who put their lives on the line to carry that message, first to those who didn't receive it and later to everyone, all kinds of people that they may or may not have expected should even deserve to receive an invitation. Yet they delivered it.

You see, unlike the man at the banquet who didn't have a wedding robe and who was *"speechless"* when asked why he didn't have one, we are called to *speak out* and *proclaim* the gospel, to share with others the invitation that we have received, the invitation to know and be known by *God's steadfast love*. We ourselves must become the *invitation* of God sent out to all people, that all might share in that great banquet where heaven and earth are wed. Amen.