

“Joy or Consequence?”  
Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9  
First Presbyterian Church  
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As I think you are all aware, when we use the Lectionary for our services, every Sunday has four suggested texts for that day. There is an Old Testament Lesson, a Psalm, a Gospel Lesson, and an Epistle. I prefer not to use the gospel lesson each week. After all, that same text is going to come around again every three years, and you might just get tired of it, even though I might come up with something new to say based on the text. I’ve always preferred to let the Spirit guide me and see which text reaches out and grabs me. When I look back over my preaching through the years, I have preached about 40 percent of my sermons from the Old Testament and about 60 percent of them from the New Testament. Today, however, I am actually going to base what I say on the gospel lesson, in large measure because I wanted to see if I could make sense of it. There are things in it that just do not sound like Jesus, and therefore I was tempted to entitle the sermon, “It just doesn’t make sense!” Let’s see what we can do with it.

We actually have two parables put together in this section of scripture. The first is about a group of people who had been invited to a banquet, but were so busy they ignored the invitation, enabling others to be invited. The second is about guests at a banquet, one of whom was not appropriately dressed. So, let’s separate them and put them in their historical context, recognizing that both are about the nature of the Kingdom of God.

In the first parable, a king invites guests to the wedding feast of his son, but doesn’t give an exact time to arrive. According to the commentary by William Barclay that I consulted, that was not an uncommon practice. The invitation went out ahead of time, and when things were ready, the guests were summoned. Having had warning, they were expected to be prepared to come.

These guests, however, were so engrossed with the everyday things of life, that they had made no preparations. The things that distracted them were not in and of themselves bad. They were what we all face—business obligations, making a living for our families, going to a concert that one of our children is playing in, a ball game that another child has on the agenda, or visiting the home of a relative who needed some assistance. All are perfectly good excuses in the eyes of the invited guests. They so valued their own endeavors, however, that they mistreated the king’s messengers.

What would the people of Jesus’ day have heard as he told this story? Why were the Jewish leaders always angry with him and trying to marginalize him, while the plain folks followed and idolized him? It’s because the Jewish leaders and teachers knew that his parables were often directed at them, and this is one of them. Who had ignored the commandments of

the Lord over time and mistreated and even killed the prophets whom God had sent to warn the people of Israel? The leaders, because they saw their power and influence being threatened. Too many of them were in business for themselves and not for God. They liked their power, their influence, their incomes, and the respect people showed them. Power is like a heroine high. One simply cannot get enough of it, and one needs continual, ongoing fixes. The center of the world becomes one's self, and nothing else and no one else matters.

Now comes the really hard part of the parable, because it just doesn't sound anything like Jesus. This is where the story has to be put back into its historical context, not that of Jesus' day but into the time when the Gospel of Matthew was written. We believe the Gospel was probably written somewhere between 80 and 90 AD. But something disastrous had happened to the Jewish nation in 70 AD. Jerusalem was leveled by the Romans. When I was teaching in Jerusalem, I had the chance to walk through the ruins of old Jerusalem that were buried under the rubble. We walked through what was left of the homes of the priests and Levites on the west of temple mount that had been excavated after being destroyed and buried under the trash that was left of them. The destruction was complete.

If you remember Jesus had warned his disciples that the day would come when they would see the impending destruction of Jerusalem, and they could save themselves only by fleeing the city. In the fifties, the Christians saw the handwriting on the wall and fled from Jerusalem into the hills. The Jewish inhabitants chose to find their security behind the imposing walls of the city. And they were imposing. It took the Romans four years of siege before they were finally able to break in and destroy the city and its temple. Nothing was left. Not one stone was left atop another, as Jesus had predicted, and the Christians had left the city and were spared. The author of Matthew knew all this, and so he sees Jerusalem's destruction as Israel's penalty for not heeding the call and the teachings of the Lord Jesus. This is the author's interpretation of Jesus' teaching and the historical events, not Jesus's.

In Jesus' original parable, I don't believe the destruction of the invited guests was part of his teaching. Instead, he went straight to the invitation of the unexpected, the people of the streets and byways, the people who never expected to get an invitation. When most of those who had for 10 centuries been the recipients of God's goodness and grace refused his ultimate gift in Jesus, he turned and invited in the outcastes, the Gentiles, the unclean, women, children, lepers, beggars, shepherds, and anyone else who was on the fringes of society. The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of inclusion and joy, not of exclusion. Everybody is welcome. Not one is excluded from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But there is something in human nature that seems to need to exclude peoples who are not as we are. If we can be better than someone else, that gives us standing, that gives us power, that gives us superiority. And that is exactly what we are seeing in our own country today. Yet, the conscious attempt to drive wedges between people to gain power and influence only undermines the greatness we once had, because we were once ONE. E Pluribus Unum—Out of many, ONE. All people were once invited to come and together make this country great. Now only those who are the right color, the right religion, the right educational

level are invited anymore. Those are not the ones Jesus invited into his kingdom, and perhaps we need to rethink whom we invite into our country, before we find ourselves excluded along with the rest of the “rabble.”

Now we come to the second parable. Much like the first parable, it is based on a Rabbinic teaching about a king who invites people to a feast, without designating the specific time. Some of the invitees figure that the feast is not far off, so they bathe and dress appropriately, and then stand outside the king’s gate, waiting for the call to the party. Others, figure that it will be a long time before the dinner is ready, and so they go about their daily business without a second thought. The call comes, however, much sooner than they expected, and while the ones prepared go in and are welcomed, those who are unprepared are left outside—all but one, that is, who seems to have sneaked in the back door! He is there with his grubby work clothes on.

Now a second Rabbinic parable comes into play. In this one, the king gives to his subjects beautiful robes. Some take them home and store them away carefully while others wear them to work and get them filthy. When the king calls for the robes, those who kept them safe return them in pristine condition, while the others can return only dirty clothing. The wise were rewarded, and the foolish were imprisoned. In this Rabbinic parable, the robes represent the people’s souls. The door is wide open to all who will come in, but they are expected to come in with clean souls. Grace is a gift, but those who receive God’s grace also have responsibilities. It is to clothe themselves with goodness, honesty, purity, love, and compassion. The Christian message is a message of change. The passage from Philippians gives us insight into some of the changes that should be part of our lives, if we really claim to know Jesus.

Paul starts this passage out with the general call to “rejoice in the Lord.” It doesn’t matter at all what our condition may be, whether wealthy or poor, sick or well, employed or unemployed. All are called to rejoice in the Lord. As I read this, I remembered a time when my daughter, Marta, and I were in New Delhi, India. Our hotel looked out over railroad tracks, and as I looked down, I noticed a small family camped along the tracks. There was a mother and father and two or three children. My first thought was “what a ghastly place to live! How could one ever have any joy in life there?” But as I watched, they were laughing and playing together. They had a polyethylene sheet on two sticks for a shelter, a fire on which sat a metal pot, and that was it. But they had each other, and they rejoiced in that unity and commonality. That is what it means to rejoice in the Lord. The outside circumstances don’t matter, because we have clothed ourselves with the joy of the Lord.

It was because of their spiritual clothing that those who were invited late to the feast got to stay. They had set their minds on the fine things of life. They saw beauty all around them. They saw God’s hand in the beauty of nature. They saw virtue in other people, and they tried to emulate the good they saw in them. They knew that division within the church or the community or the country was from the dark side of the force, and they wanted no part of it. They knew that a divided church is no church at all, and that a divided country will collapse in

on itself. If that happens to the United States, it will leave a worldwide vacuum into which other nations will walk and fill it. That is the juncture at which America stands right now, unless we can learn the lesson that the National Conference of Christians and Jews tried to teach to everyone with whom they associated. That lesson was that we have to “learn to agree to disagree agreeably.” If we can’t, we will destroy ourselves, and at the moment, we as Americans are well on our way to doing that.

Paul also tells us to look for that which is just. This has been a year of struggle over whether there is injustice in the fabric of American society when it comes to race relations. In my mind, there is absolutely no question that there is, and to do nothing about it calls the entire American justice system into question. Can I appear in the presence of the Lord wearing a robe of injustice? I don’t think so, and therefore I must find ways to challenge the societal racism that surrounds me. I have a small voice, but it must be raised wherever I can raise it, or perhaps I can contribute to those who have greater visibility than I do. But act, I must.

Paul also calls us to clothe ourselves in purity. There is so much in this world that is filthy and crude. Probably one of the most obvious is the plague of pornography that is almost universally available on the internet. It is destroying marriages. It is enticing old and young alike into relationships that objectify women, girls, and boys. It is invading every area of life and work. All one has to do is pick up a newspaper or turn on the news to see that one more person has been charged with pedophilia or sexual abuse of a minor, and those persons are teachers, pastors, and priests, as well as persons from all other walks of life. We can’t bring that kind of impurity into God’s presence, but be assured that if one suffers from this, Christ can indeed change him or her and provide them with a clean robe, so that they may sit down with him.

Now, let’s return to the parables. After Israel chose to follow its own course, Jesus threw the gates of the kingdom wide open to anyone who would come in, take his hand, and commit to a changed life and to changed relationships. No one, absolutely no one, is excluded from that invitation. That is why the Christian community is not composed of only one ethnicity, one color of people, or one nationality. Everybody is welcome. But we have often so focused on the “everybody” that we sometimes forget that we must come to that banquet clothed in the righteousness of Jesus which he will put on us, if we will be willing to commit to changing our lives and the directions in which we are moving. Today, I would like to call us all to the joy of the feast, recognizing that if we choose a way other than the Lord’s way, there will be the consequence that we cannot dwell in his presence, nor would we want to.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.