

Choosing To Be Chosen

Matthew 22:1-14

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Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king
who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his servants to call those
who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other servants, saying,
‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner,
my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered,
and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm,
another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves,
mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged.
He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves,
‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.
Go therefore into the main streets,
and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’

Those servants went out into the streets
and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad;
so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests,
he noticed a man there who
was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him,
‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’
And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot,
and throw him into the outer darkness,
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

For many are called, but few are chosen.”

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I.

I would like to begin today with a challenge. Not just a theological and exegetical challenge, but one which also goes right to the heart and hope of our faith. Specifically, what to do with verses 11-14:

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a person there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

II.

Our scripture passage today is in the form of a parable. Parables actually come in one of three different forms or types. First, there is the Similitude. These are accounts of real life situations which attempt to persuade the listener by making a comparison with something that is universally understood. The appeal is to the known, typical, and reoccurring. A similitude tries to gain acceptance for a concept by comparing it with that which is already accepted. An example would be Mark 4:30-32

“Jesus also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”

III.

The second type of parable is called a Parable Proper. It differs from a similitude in that it is a freely invented story which tells of a specific event, or series of events, and is used as an analogy to point *beyond* itself. An analogy is a comparison made between two things which otherwise are dissimilar, but in a particular way, or under certain circumstances, they are seen as similar.

The parable proper deals not with the universal, but the particular. It tells of an individual person, not people in general. It is through the specifics and realism of the story that it attempts to convince. An example of a Parable Proper would be the parable of the Prodigal Son or the parable of the Good Samaritan.

IV.

The third and final type of parable is called an Example Story. A freely created story composed by its author to point to models of action to be imitated or warnings to be heeded. Rather than point beyond itself to a comparable situation, the Example Story incorporates its meaning into the story itself. The meaning is found *within* the narrative.

All of that said, our scripture reading for today, the parable of the Wedding Banquet, is a bit of a tough nut. It incorporates some, but not all, of both the Parable Proper, and the Example Story. As such it is a bit of a hybrid. So, let's see what the parable has to say and, then, we will resume our challenge.

V.

Jesus tells this parable to describe to the listener (**YOU**, in this case) what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It seems there a King (*who we take to be God*) who throws a big party, a feast, a banquet for his son (*who we take to be Jesus*). Now, there seems to be a small group of folks who have *already* been invited to the banquet (i.e, the Jewish people). So, the King sends his servants to call them, saying the time is now, the feast is ready, this is it, get with the program. However, those with the standing invitation blow it off and go back to their families, farms, and businesses, and in the worse case actually mistreat and kill the King's servants. In response, the King unleashes a fury of retribution upon those who proved themselves to be unworthy of the invitation. (*This we might understand to be an apocalyptic vision of the future for those who don't respond to the call.*)

The King (God) then goes to plan "B." *This* time EVERYONE gets an invitation, and is called to the Banquet (*the Kingdom*). The servants go out to the highways and the byways, the cities and towns, and gather all they could find, *both* the good and the bad. And this great throng of newly called people fills the wedding hall.

VI.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is a fairly straightforward picture of God's call through Christ which is, first, rejected by the chosen people and, then, extended to all the people of the world. By the way, this parable is evidence of the long lost "Q" source, or Quote Source, as the parable of the wedding banquet appears both in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. However, there is a slight difference between the Lucan and Matthean versions which is the source of our challenge today. The Matthean version includes the addition of this poor fellow without a wedding robe who gets thrown into the outer darkness, (*not just the darkness mind you, but the outer darkness*) where, just to remind you, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Because, it seems, many are called, but few are chosen.

VII.

Here, then, is the challenge we face this morning. The King calls *everyone* to the feast; the parable says both the good *and* the bad. Yet, seemingly, if you don't wear the right clothes (*whatever that means*) you get voted off the island in a big way. When we hear this parable it dawns on us that it is important to know if we are indeed chosen, or just called? At this point we need to pause a moment and realize this is no small problem, but, a very HUGE problem. These four verses have the potential to challenge the very foundation of our understanding of the nature of Grace.

VIII.

We believe and confess in the God who sent his only child to die on the cross that we might be redeemed from our sins and be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. We have faith that this gift of eternal life comes to us not through our works (for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God) but that salvation is a *gift* of Grace plain and simple. There is nothing we can do to *attain* it, we can only *receive* it. **RIGHT?!?!** So how is it that we can be *called* to God's grace but not *chosen* for it? It would seem, at least according to the version of the parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew's gospel, that something *else* is at work here; some other criteria which decides if are allowed to remain at the celebration in the kingdom of God *or* if we will be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness.

IX.

Therefore, the question becomes, and it is a very important question as our scripture passage assures us, what is the criteria for being admitted to the wedding banquet? What decides who gets to wear the wedding robe and feast at the king's table, versus who gets bound hand and foot and is cast into the outer darkness where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth?

I think that *this* church identified that criteria 26 years ago, when in June of 2000 it adopted the following mission statement:

The Mission of the First Presbyterian Church of Canton is to reach out to all people & welcome them in celebrating truly the joys, freedoms, and responsibilities that come with our faith in God, Christ's unconditional love for us, and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our world.

*Through this nurturing Christian Community we will fully recognize the value of each believer, humbly forgive ourselves and others, and lovingly **embrace God's Grace.***

X.

We have all been called, and given entrance into the Kingdom by God's grace. This is the victory of the cross. However, we only remain *in* the Kingdom to the degree we *ourselves* choose to *embrace* God's Grace and claim our seat at the celebration. The poor chap in the parable did have a place at the table. Grace is complete and freely given, make no mistake about that. However, he gave it up because he didn't have a wedding robe. Not because he was too poor to buy one, and not because he was caught unprepared and failed to bring one but because, metaphorically, he didn't join in the incredible celebration which had been prepared both in honor of Christ, and for his enjoyment. In other words, he didn't embrace the grace.

XII.

God calls each and everyone of us to grace but we, in turn, must choose to embrace that grace. Grace can only be received, not earned; **BUT** we only fully *receive* that grace *when we are responding to it*. **That is the heart and hope of our faith.** We, then, *are* the criteria! Will we choose to be bound in the darkness, or, will we join in the great celebration of life which God prepares for us each and every day, and finally, when all our days are done? For many are called, but few make the choice to consider themselves chosen. That, my friends, is the greatest challenge we face: choosing to be chosen.