

Wedding Crashers

October 12, 2008 | Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 23)

Lectionary citations

Exodus 32:1-14 with Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

We are continuing to work through the parables Jesus preached to the Chief Priests and Pharisees in the courts of the great temple of Jerusalem. These were the most religious and righteous people of the day, the great and the good. Yet they would reject Jesus just as they had rejected John the Baptist. They rejected John and Jesus for what they saw as good reasons. Matthew indicates that among these reasons were that John and Jesus lacked legitimate religious authority. The version of the parable in Matthew seems to look back at the consequences of the rejection of Jesus by the Priests and Pharisees: the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. To Mathew, these terrible events were God's punishment on the religious leaders for their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah. However, this punishment, if that is what it was, came many years later.

On that day in the Temple, Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they cannot block his mission. When the Priests and the Pharisees would not follow John, he did not give up. When Jesus was rejected by the great and the good, Jesus did not stop healing, teaching, and preaching. Jesus brought the good news to everyone, the good and the bad, anyone who would listen. The focus of Jesus' work was on those who would listen, not on those who would not. Those who would not listen killed Jesus, but they still could not stop his work.

We want to say that we have no problem applying this parable to our church. We are the servants sent out to invite everyone to God's extravagant banquet, celebrating the wedding of the Son of God, the Christ, with his bride the Church. Our role is clearly to welcome everyone into the Church, the outpost of God's Kingdom here on earth. After all, the current slogan of our denomination is "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." We want to say that everyone is welcome to our congregation, both the bad and the good. However, when we are honest with ourselves, we know that there are limits to this welcome.

Speaking personally, the only limit I have on my mission work is my personal safety. In other words, I do not plan to do mission work where I am likely to be killed. Other than this limit, I believe I am generally ready to respond to God's call to serve those in need. I have no problem eating with sinners, talking with them about God, and praying with them. I am enough of a Christian to follow Jesus into mission to those who most need my help—the sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors of my day. The tough question is

whether I am a Christian enough to welcome them into my congregation. Am I willing to see them every Sunday and deal with their problems on a daily basis? This is a much tougher question.

Even a church that states that it welcomes everyone has unspoken limits on those whom it will welcome. These limits are enforced informally, but with amazing effectiveness. Those who are outside of these limits are quickly made to feel unwanted. This congregation is amazingly friendly to visitors. Yet on one occasion, I did see a visitor who was obviously "odd" being almost ignored after the service. Eventually, the unwanted get the message and disappear from the life of the church.

Some churches find it difficult to welcome families with children who want to stay together throughout the service. In practice, they will only welcome families willing to send their children to the nursery or children's church during part or all of the service. Some churches that say they welcome everyone are actually very unwelcoming to the badly dressed and poorly groomed. Other churches find it impossible to welcome those with obvious mental disabilities. A woman told me about a very liberal and idealistic UCC congregation that had declared itself an "open and affirming" congregation, welcoming everyone without qualification. Yet, it was made clear to this woman that her autistic son was not welcome in service...the noises he made were bothering the other church members. How many churches will welcome those who come to service high or drunk or who steal from the church or disrupt services?

Each congregation has its own limits on what is normal and acceptable for membership. However, I am not sure what Jesus would say about those limits. If the Church is an outpost of the Kingdom of God, then we need to examine the ways in which the Church is falling short of the Kingdom's model. If the Kingdom is like a banquet to which everyone, good and bad, is invited, we need to ask ourselves how we can become just a little more like that Kingdom. It is not enough just to hide behind nice slogans such as "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here," or "extravagant welcome," or the church for "all the people." We need to be honest and realistic about who can actually feel welcome in our congregation with its particular building, history, style of worship, and mix of people. We need to be honest and realistic about whom we are ready to welcome. At the same time, we always need to be pushing ourselves to be more like the banquet of this parable.

Our fear about welcoming everyone into the Church may be rooted in our doubts about the Church's ability to transform those it welcome in. Jesus welcomed the bad and the good because he knew that they both could be saved. Yet will all those gathered into the banquet be saved?

Today's parable has a sting in its tail. One of those gathered into the banquet is judged, is found to be improperly dressed, and is thrown into the outer darkness. He is clearly not saved for the Kingdom. Many commentators dislike this part of the parable and point out that it is not included in Luke's version. This element of judgment seems to undermine the inclusiveness, the gathering in of both the good and the bad that goes before.

Yet if the gathering is an action by God, then it requires a response by us. It is less comfortable to shift gears and start thinking of ourselves as sinners to be gathered in rather than servants extending the extravagant welcome. When we are gathered in, we must be willing to be changed, to put on the robes

of a new life in Christ. One commentator linked the wedding robe of this parable to St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. As Paul puts it, our response to the invitation must be to clothe ourselves with Christ.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

St. Augustine, one of the great preacher's and teachers of the early Church stated that the wedding garment was love. He related the parable to St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

"Whatever can this wedding garment be, then? For an answer we must go to the Apostle, who says: The purpose of our command is to arouse the love that springs from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith. There is your wedding garment. It is not love of just any kind. Many people of bad conscience appear to love one another, but you will not find in them the love that springs from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith. Only that kind of love is the wedding garment."

Our membership in the Church, the body of Christ, is only real if we choose to let Christ transform us, to be renewed and be clothed in Christ. If we go to the banquet and yet refuse to be changed, we are already living in that outer darkness in our hearts. If we believe that we ourselves have been changed and will be changed by our relationship with the Church, then we might be more confident in welcoming difficult people into our congregation, faithful that they too will choose to be changed by Christ.

How can we learn to be clothed in Christ? How can we learn to love? It may not be as hard as it seems. St. Paul gives us some pretty clear and simple steps to take upon the way in today's Epistle.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

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St. Augustine, Sermon 90 retrieved from http://liturgy.slu.edu/28OrdA101208/theword_journey.html