

The Emperor's New Clothes

October 12, 2014

Shepherd's Grace Church

Then Jesus continued to teach them in parables saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wanted to give a wedding feast for his son. The king sent out his slaves to those who had been invited saying to them, 'The wedding feast is prepared. Come to the festival!' Those who were invited did not come so again the king sent out his slaves saying to them, 'Tell those who have been invited, "I have prepared the oxen and have slaughtered my fatted calves. Everything is ready, come to the feast!" Those who had been invited, however, made light of the invitation; going about their own business. One returned to his farm and another to his business, while others seized the slaves, mistreated them and killed them!

Enraged, the king sent his soldiers to kill those murderers and burn their city. Then the king said to his slaves, 'The wedding feast is ready but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore, out into the main streets and invite everyone you meet so that my hall will be filled. The slaves then went out into the streets and invited all whom they met, both good and bad.

When the king came to the banquet room to greet his guests, he found a man without a wedding robe. 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 out into the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth for many are called but few are chosen.'" (Matt. 22: 1-14) (Also read Phil. 4: 10-13)

Today is pet blessing Sunday at Shepherd's Grace and there will be many distractions during worship. I think that distractions are ok once in awhile. Distractions can help us focus if we keep our concentration on our true purpose. For example, when I write or study, I often do it with the T.V. on. I do this to help me turn up the noise level in my mind by forcing my concentration to drown out the background noise of the television. By contrast, when I go to sleep, I turn on the television to help me quiet the noise in my mind and allow me to fall asleep. As a result, I fall asleep with the t.v. on and I wake up to turn the television on! The same distraction works in different ways for me...for me I said, not necessarily for Rochelle who complains about both!

Still, I contend that distractions can be helpful. If for no other reason, distractions help us appreciate the times we get to work without distraction. Distractions help us appreciate the times we get to worship when there are no distractions. Distractions can help us then to appreciate those times when fullness comes! I think this is a little of what the apostle Paul is talking to the Philippians about this morning.

In those times when we seem to have little, we can be distracted as we focus on our need. It doesn't matter what the need is. If we are hungry, we find ourselves thinking more about food and where our next meal is coming from. If it is finance, we find ourselves thinking more about where our next paycheck is going to come from. If it is for companionship, we find ourselves distracted as we think

about how we might meet or be more involved with someone special so we will not feel so alienated or abandoned!

In those times when we seem to have too much, we find ourselves equally distracted! Some might be snickering and smiling at the prospect of having too much but think about it. At our house, we have two refrigerators and a freezer. Probably 95% of the people in the world do not enjoy that privilege and we certainly count our blessings, however, at times when we have food given to us just after we have gone to the grocery store we wonder and worry about where we will put all the groceries and how we will make sure that none of the food spoils! How can we protect what we have without seeming so arrogant as to impose upon others in the midst of our good fortune! Now, I admit that for the past couple of weeks with extra teenagers in the house that has not been much of a problem. The extra mouths have created a vacuum that pretty much sucks up any extra food in its path!

While I speak somewhat tongue in cheek about an abundant food supply, most can relate to times when there has been just too much sickness, too much death, too much relationship drama. I have spoken on many occasions to many of you who have expressed that you “Just do not know how much more you can handle.” Too much is as much of a challenge in our world as too little and while most of us do not think in terms of excess being an effort, Paul reminds us today that, indeed it can be.

He says, I know what it is like to have little. I know what it is to have much, and whether I have little or much, I have learned the secret to success in my relationship with God! That secret is the underpinning to the lesson the Evangelist Matthew has for us this morning. His lesson once again comes in a parable and once again, it comes as an admonition! The admonition, this time however is not just to the elite. The admonition is for those who would replace the elite, for those who think it looks easy to lead, for those who think abundance and wealth are simple resources to manage. Most of us think it is easy to manage from abundance but God has a word for us today!

Still talking to the elite, the Pharisees and elders, Jesus continues the conversation we have listened in on for the past two weeks. Remember, the Pharisees and the elders, and perhaps even a few of us have forgotten that God does not repay evil with evil. God repays evil with good! God judges, not as the world judges but as God and God’s ways are as far above the world’s ways as are the heavens above the earth! (Is. 58) God wants us to know that when we treat God with disrespect, when we abuse God’s love, when we seek to steal, kill and destroy, even God’s Son, God will judge us just as God judged the priests in the days of Zephaniah! In those days, God forgave the priests for polluting the worship place. God forgave the elite for not giving of their very best! God forgave those who had forgotten God’s commands. God wants to do that in the days of Jesus. God wants to do that in our day as well!

It can be distracting to realize that God wants to forgive all our sins! We want to be suspicious! We want to be skeptical! We want to ask, “What’s in that for God?” “What’s God’s motive?” Even in hearing God’s desire from God’s own mouth, we still struggle! We still have trouble! “For the ‘Son of Man’ did not come into the world to judge the world but so that the world might be redeemed through him!” (John 3: 17) We get distracted as we get caught up in the ways of the world and we just cannot take it all in. Jesus knows this. He knows this about the elders and he knows this about us! It is for this

reason that he teaches the lesson to us again in the form of a parable! He does not want our own hatred and skepticism to keep us from hearing the meaning behind the message!

As we unpack the parable, we begin to discover some of what was made known to us a few weeks ago. For those who were here, you will remember I offered a perspective that when Jesus says, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like," he is describing similarities. When Jesus says, "the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to," he is inviting us to look at earthly systems and recognize that things will not be so in heaven. Today, we are invited into a comparison. Today, the difficult language is not the language of God about a heavenly banquet. It is the language of the world reminding us that in the world there are haves and there are have not's! There are those in a superior position and there are those who will always be inferior!

The king, and the first clue we get is that the Greek, according to Mark Davis (*Left Behind and Loving it*) *should actually be* translated human king, wants to give a wedding feast for his son. This king invites only some of those who are available. The king invites only the privileged, the elite, the special. God's invitation, while to a "chosen" group of people" was never only to the rich and powerful of that group. In fact, throughout history, God demonstrated God's desire for the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten to be part of that chosen group. God called Abraham from obscurity, God called Moses from condemnation, God called Isaac from the unlikely event that he would ever even be born! God called Sarah from old age. God called Ruth from a foreign land. God called Mary from a place of poverty. God has called you and me! God does call those who are gifted and it is God's desire that all use their gifts to God's glory but nowhere does God demonstrate a proclivity for putting people's superiority in a place above people's genuine desire to love and serve the Lord! The king demonstrates his ungodliness by calling only those whom he believes are in positions to possibly help him .

In the parable of the Landowner which we studied last week, we learned that the slaves of God, who is the landowner, were prophets. The people who heard them killed them because they could not stand the words with which they were convicted. In the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus promises such action. (Matt. 5.12) The slaves of this human king, however are not killed; they are not heard! The people ignore their invitation and generally pay them no heed! This first group of slaves are not prophets and it is generally recognized that they do not represent the world of God. Their invitation is considered a bribe of sorts intended to curry political and personal favor from the perceived elite.

The elders and the Pharisees hearing the story would have likely thought nothing of the story at this point. Currying political favor was a way of life for those in power in a place where power existed in a vacuum. The elders and Pharisees knew all about survival in the Roman empire where there was a continual effort on the part of all to gain a leg up. They would have likely seen no harm or even abnormality in the king's effort to curry favor.

They would have likely been surprised that some would have been so reluctant to accept the expressions of acknowledgement made by the human king. People of wealth and power were to be respected and regarded with care in the day of Jesus. The elders to whom Jesus was speaking would

have been wary at this point in the story. They already wanted to arrest Jesus for his accusations against them of failure to recognize God's grace.

When the human king sent out a second group of slaves, the elders and Pharisees would have thought of themselves. They would have recognized their own attempts to reconcile with the Romans who were occupying the land they loved. They would have believed they were doing all they could to make compromise between God and the human king. Their offer as instructed by the king was for the wealthy of the land to look at the advantages of "Pax Romana." Their offer put all the kingdoms of the world on display for the people to see. Their temptations were rejected by those who understood that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God!(Matt. 4)

Those who rejected the human king's invitation this second time did so not because they were above political bribery by a rich and powerful king. They rejected because they had seen the offer before. They remembered the Babylonians who came and took their way of life. They remembered the Greeks. Now they knew the Romans and the persecution disguised as personal favor. They were tired of the political elite pretending to put them in favorable positions and trying to purchase their loyalty.

This rejection represented a division between Matthew's Christian community and the ruling powers in religious Israel. You and I must be careful here not to see this as God's indictment against Jews. This particular passage has been used as justification by anti-Semites throughout history and there is no warrant for such conclusions. God is not choosing Matthew's community over another community. To do so would make God exactly like the human king whom Jesus portrays in the parable. Instead, God is reminding all of us that the world works based on the perceived power of material possessions. This is compared to the "kingdom of heaven" which works not based on material possession but on the possession of an understanding of Grace which was rejected by some.

This rejection took on a very real form. In the time after Jesus' crucifixion, Jews went back to the "Land" which was theirs to work. Christians went back to the business of trying to make sense of their new relationship with the world. Some, however, Christians and Jews let an insurrection against the oppressive and pervasive power of the Romans. Their revolt was met with rage by the human king who came into the community with a vengeance. The human king killed many and destroyed the temple while burning their town and leaving their life uprooted and unrecognizable!

What has been presented in the parable so far is historical. Matthew wrote his gospel account immediately after the Roman troops were ordered into Jerusalem to destroy the temple and burn the city. Their message was a simple one. Rome is in charge. Those who are willing to exist under Roman rule will comply with Roman law and if they do, they will get along fine. Those who do not comply will be dealt with harshly and there will be no exception. Religious elite, politically powerful, personally wealthy...none of that makes a difference to the Romans. Power is granted upon their authority and they will decide who is in favor and who is not. Religious convictions make no difference. There will be equal persecution for both Jews and Christians!

Those hearing Matthew's Gospel know this firsthand. They have been victims of this persecution. Many have fled Jerusalem to save themselves and their families. Many know Jewish families which have done

exactly the same thing. While the hearers of Matthew have strong disagreement with the synagogue, they know that both groups are persecuted not based on religious conviction but on political conviction. The history of events after Jesus crucifixion includes both groups as equally persecuted.

The historical allegory however is only a distraction. Jesus' parable is intended not to make a historical point or to sympathize with one side or the other in this instance. His confrontation is not with the religious or political elite. His confrontation is with us! That is right! His confrontation is with us! Up to this point, we have been distracted. WE have been trying to decide who to root for in t his story!

We have wanted to make the king God so we could claim God's righteous judgment on those who ignore God's invitation to come to the feast in the "Kingdom." We have wanted to feel comfortable and superior in our "right" choice of God as one who prepares a table for us. We have wanted to quote Psalm 23, "Thou prepares a table for me in the presence of mine enemies!" We have wanted to believe that we were among those invited with the first chosen and that we would have recognized the call of God! We have been so distracted by our own desires that we have failed to notice that the God we have been invited by is god in the world and not God of the world! We have been willing to exclude others who have been found unworthy because we have been distracted by the allure of an aroma, the aroma of good taste and comfortable living!

We have been distracted by the conflict of powers in the world. We have wanted to choose sides in the conflict claiming that God would surely choose the same way we would. We have wanted to say, "Yes, God will come to punish those who do not accept God's invitation!" We have wanted to accept that our God has not only the right, but the will to destroy those who do not do things according to his will and plan. We have been so distracted that we have forgotten that it is not God's will that any should be destroyed. Instead, it is God's will that all should be saved, all should be redeemed! (John 6: 37 ff)

In our distraction, we have paid little attention to the group that ends up coming to the banquet. The human king invites all to the banquet. The good and the bad are included and we want to be part of that group. We want to believe that even if we failed to respond to God's first call, we surely would respond to the second call. Surely God knows we were just missed the first time and we are now ready. When God's slaves, God's prophets come for us this time, we will be ready!

The truth is, this is the call many receive today. They hear of the banquet. They watch television and hear promises of a great meal, of free Grace and of a universal invitation. They believe that if they show up, they will be given a great seat at the front of the room and if they give money to the promise, they will get money and wealth and riches in return. They are so distracted by the possibility that they are among the "chosen" this time that they pay no attention when one among them is singled out for being dressed inappropriately!

I look around this morning. I see many different kinds of creatures represented at the table. We want this to be God's table. Some of us have dressed our creatures in clever costumes to invite others to take notice and claim their cuteness! Others have brought our creatures in cages or crates so they will be comfortable in surroundings that are more familiar to them. I look around and I see them and while I see many differences, I see one thing that is the same. Each of us has a great love for our creature!

Each of us wants to care for our creature and when we leave here today, we will take this loving pet who provides unconditional love for us and we will return to our home to provide a safe and secure environment for this one who loves us so much. We are not distracted by the garb of others! We are not distracted by the “cuteness” or the crates. We are focused on the love we have for the ones we have chosen!

What Jesus wants us to hear today is that we have indeed been distracted! We...none of us...not Jews, not Christians raised a finger or said a word when the one who was singled out was bound and thrown into the outer darkness. Not one of us was offended that this one who was different from us was singled out to be persecuted by the human king for failing to conform to the standards of the world. Not one of us considered the possibility that this one who was different from us was different for a reason.

All of us...all of us participated in the persecution of the “Emperor who wore new clothes.” Most of us remember that in the story, the Emperor was naked and as Jesus tells his story this morning, He stands naked before us. He is in our midst, waiting for one of us to speak up, to recognize him to respond to his mistreatment and put an end to his persecution but all of us stand idly by as the king strips him of his dignity, beats him, places a crown of thorns on his head and leads him off to an ignominious death on a cross.

Jesus is the one who came to eat with the good and the bad. He dined with Pharisees, with tax collectors, with prostitutes and with us! He comes into our midst and we see him unbathed, unclean and when someone wants to put him out because they are offended, he looks to us to speak up. When we fail to do so, we fail him once more! Do not be distracted by the noises of this morning. Do not be distracted by the different appearance of the creatures in our congregation. Jesus is in our midst! He is present in our lives and in our world. He is in the “good and the bad” and he lives among us as one who is the least. He is king of our lives only if we will recognize him as king of our lives. He wants to be welcomed and not rejected. He is emperor and “*The Emperor Has New Clothes.*” Amen!