

October 11, 2020

Paws and Reflect

Shepherd's Grace Church

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. <sup>4</sup>Again he sent other slaves, 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.’ <sup>5</sup>But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup>while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. <sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup>and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>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.’ <sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matt. 22: 1-14)

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup>I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. <sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

<sup>10</sup>I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4: 1-13)

The passage from the evangelist Matthew is a particularly difficult one and it is even more difficult when we hear it on a Sunday morning where we are limited in our ability to ask questions. I think, in part that is why it is mollified by the passage from Paul.

Paul begins his message to us today by thinking the people who have been so integral a part of his ministry. Most notably, he thanks women. Over the years, Paul's teachings have earned bad marks from women who think he is sexist and misogynistic. It is difficult for us to know exactly what is in Paul's heart as he writes. We know the culture from which he writes is quite different and we also know he is evolving as a Christian. For this morning, because of these unknowns, I am willing to look past his attitudes and accept his sincerity in thanks.

I am willing to do this because it helps us...not just me, but all of us to recognize the truth of all that Paul is saying. He speaks from his heart and he speaks I believe to many of us as he acknowledges that sometimes he has been lacking in what he has...I think both in faith and in physical needs. He further acknowledges that sometimes he has had an abundance...again, I think of both faith and physical. Then, however he goes on to state the lesson he has learned in both these things, a lesson I believe all of us know. He can do all things through Christ who gives him strength.

It is this same Christ, the Christ who gives us strength in a little and in a lot whom we meet this morning and many of us are uncomfortable in His presence. Jesus is pissed off! (I did not use this language on tape...you can go to Facebook and check but I use it here because you cannot see my face to let me illustrate to you how discourage and disappointed he is.) We struggle with an angry Jesus. Angry Jesus is inconsistent with the lessons we have learned about him in Sunday School and he frightens us.

If you are frightened after reading this passage but before reading the rest of the sermon, I say to you what Jesus tells us so frequently, "Do not be afraid."

As Jesus begins the parable today, we should recall the past three Sundays and the parables we have heard from Him. In the first, we did not see God,

but a manipulative landlord who exercised only power over others and completely controlled them. This person was reflective of the power elite who had come to power in the silent years and wanted desperately to hold on to that power. They aligned themselves with the Roman Empire so that their power could be secured, and they feared any threat to that power because it ultimately threatened their wealth and lifestyle.

In the second parable, we found the benevolent God who created for His chosen people a wonderful place to produce fruit, only to be betrayed by those people to the point of killing even His Son so they could hold on to the land and wealth they had grown accustomed to. God is revealed to us accurately in this portrayal, but so are the people. They are the same vineyard managers we met in the previous parable.

Today, we come to an accounting of the history of God's relationship with God's people and it is a difficult accounting. It reminds us of something we as twenty-first century Christians continue to struggle with. It reminds us that we have a choice.

"The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who has prepared a wedding banquet for his son." In the grandest of Hebrew tradition, the banquet is made ready. In the fullness of time, the son has come to claim his bride and the king is prepared to celebrate.

Obviously, here we recognize the King as God. The Son is Jesus, and he has come to claim his bride. For years, a popular analogy has linked Jesus and the bridegroom and the Church (notice capital letter indicating universal church) as bride. This analogy is taken from scripture in Ephesians 5. Now, the son has come after preparing a place for the bride and it is time for the wedding.

The chosen, the Hebrew people, and in particular their leaders are invited to come and witness the union. They refuse.

This is where we struggle. Could God not manipulate them to come? Could God not order them to come? Is God not sovereign and omnipotent? These are all questions we wonder as the chosen people; the guests refuse. Hopefully, these questions lead us to search the source for answers. The source in this case is scripture.

We do not have to search far in scripture. In the very first chapter of Genesis and in verses 26-29, God answers our questions. "Let us make them, male and female," God says. "In our own image and likeness, let us create them."

It is that image and likeness thing that reminds us that God did not create us as God created the cattle that stand in the field. God created humankind with

the ability to think and reason and to choose. Choice is the essential point Jesus wants to bring us to in the parable He speaks this morning.

When God sends out his slaves, God sends them to those who have been invited, to the chosen. The chosen, of course are the descendants of Abraham to whom God made the promise that God would make of him a great nation. I am certain that you are curious about the slaves and all the imagery that comes from that term. I will come back to it in a moment but first, let me deal with the chosen people.

All the Hebrew people were chosen. They were all invited to the banquet and God wanted all of them to receive and welcome the Son. Over the four hundred years since God spoke to them last, this people had been corrupted and brainwashed by extra-biblical instruction from leaders who were motivated not by love of God and Neighbor but by power and rule over neighbor and a disregard for God in order to perpetuate their power.

In the world we live in today, we might draw a parallel to the Klu Klux Klan of the '30's or to the McCarthyites of the 50's or to the religious elite who we see regularly on television talking about the prosperity gospel and advocating that if we have faith we will have money.

These people had and have elicited enormous power and influence over their followers and to that end have traded religious worship for worship of religion. When the slaves came to invite these large groups of people, they dismissed the slaves. They made light of the invitation and they did not come.

The slaves in this instance are not the oppressed we have come to struggle with so much in current times. They are not the ones who have been oppressed by systemic racism and unequal opportunity so we should not draw too much parallel to them.

The one exception to that statement is that they are slaves. Instead of being subject to a human master, however, they are slaves to the word of God. These slaves are the prophets of the Hebrew Bible who invited God's chosen to obey the intent and content of God's message. Their invitation was and is a reminder of God's love and desire that we choose God and God alone. They are the prophets that speak truth to power and remind us that God's message and God's Kingdom will prevail. Their slavery is to the love of God and not to the abuse of human beings.

Out of love, they come to the chosen and the chosen exercise their freedom. In the image and likeness of God, they choose not to come. In almost every week of Bible Study, we question their choice. We ask how could they have

missed the opportunity to choose God's love? We wonder how they could have missed it, often ignoring the notion that we continue to miss it even to this day! We the invitation because we are too busy with our lives and the events of the world that the events of salvation simply escape us. My suspicion is that the people of the first century missed for some of the same reasons.

At any rate, the people fail to respond but God does not give up on them. In fact, that is one of the incredibly positive messages we should take from this parable. Time and time again, God reaches out to us; offering an opportunity for us to choose God. Time and time again, God hopes that we will choose differently.

When God reaches out the second time, with the second group of slaves, the people react with even greater indifference. They make light of the invitation. They walk away and return to the quiet desperation of their own lives. One returns to the farm, one to the business while others, so idle in their own activities as to have nothing more meaningful to do, abuse and beat and even kill those sent by God with no apparent explanation for their actions.

While the people have no explanation for their actions, God does. Reacting in God's right to choose, God cuts them off. God separates their lives from God's and removes them from all accounts of history.

Early on, I claimed Jesus was angry because of the choices people made and continue to make regarding him and his mission. He is angry because he knows that actions do have consequence. To be cut off is to be cut off. To be cut off is to be completely and totally separated from the presence and power of God. When we make this choice, it is a devastating choice in its power. It is in fact, a sentence to hell!

Those who chose not to come, make this choice and we can only hope they have listened to the prophets so that theirs is an informed choice. God will not try to talk them out of it. God, after all, created them and us in God's own image and likeness. God gave and gives freedom to choose. God also gave information so that our choice might be an informed choice. His prophets reminded us to meditate on the word day and night, (Jer. 1) and to keep his commandments, (Ex. 20) and to put him to the test. (Mal. 3) Jesus is angry because the people have not taken seriously the promises of God. Is Jesus angry at you?

God cuts off those who choose to be cut off. He does not cut off any who are willing to be part of the kingdom. His actions are always to bring forth the coming of the kingdom. He tells the servants (here they are referred to as

servants and not as slaves. We might presume from that that there is a reward for their work) that the feast is prepared.

Preparation indicates that the events of history have conspired to create a moment. It is a moment we and all of creation have been waiting for. It is the moment of the arrival and our story today stops just short of that moment. I believe this is where we exist in time, just short of the moment of the coming of the Son.

God sends the servants out to gather other people, ones who will come and thereby be worthy. God says bring them all and once again we marvel at God's continued desire to reach to all. Some are unworthy but many are not. The servants go out into the main streets to bring them all.

Notice here that this group of servants goes out just to the main streets. They do not go the side streets or out to the countryside. They gather the first but they leave many others. These are not left behind. They are left for us. It is our great and good privilege to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 28)

All the guests come in, the good and the bad. It is important that we mark this expression. Many in our lives and indeed, many of us have done that which is bad. Our friend Paul reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! Still God invites all and all of us enter aware that none of us are worthy.

Most of us enter prepared. We have heard the message of salvation and we have made ourselves ready. We recognize that there is nothing we can do to accomplish our own salvation. We are totally dependent on Christ for that. We remember the words of Paul. We know what it is like to have much and what it is like to have little, but we also learn that everything accomplished is accomplished in Christ!

We are prepared to greet the King and give all the glory, all the praise, all the honor to Christ alone for it is only by Christ that we can accomplish that which God most desires for us.

We repent of our sin because we understand that sin is a deal breaker with God. God cannot be in the presence of sin and we understand that. We lay all our sin at the feet of Christ and He carries that to the cross for us. We are made clean by the blood-stained garments he wears. For us he washes these garments white as snow!

But that is not the end of the story is it? Have any of you ever been told by your parents what to wear to church? I suspect that at least a few have had

that experience. I know I have. When I was young and first started going to church, my apparel was paramount. Mom insisted that I always have on my Sunday best! From the first days of my going, I wore my black suit and white shirt and tie. I polished my shoes with my dad around the breakfast table before I left for church. There was no question allowed and for years, none asked.

As I got older, however, I recognized that not all my friends were wearing the same clothes I was to church. They were coming in jeans and t-shirts. They were coming in sneakers. They were coming with no socks! I started to argue with my mom about why I had to dress differently from my friends. My mom told me she didn't care what my friends were wearing, I was going to wear my Sunday Best! That is just what you do.

In reading the passage today, I now know how right my mother was. When the King came to meet the guests, he saw one person not wearing a wedding gown. He asked the man why he was underdressed. The man had no answer!

The wedding gown Jesus is talking about here is the gown of grace that covers each of us as we enter the kingdom. Because none of us is worthy to stand before God we must rely on Jesus. We can know what it means to be rich or poor, but we can never know what it is to be sinless! Only Christ can know that.

The wedding gown is his covering for us. It is that which gives us the ability to stand before God and stand blameless! It is that garment that was blood stained with our sin but is now washed white as snow because of God's amazing grace.

If we choose...and there's that word again...we can refuse to don the garment. Even knowing the gift given us by Christ, even after accepting the gift we can step back from it. We can say that we want to do things by ourselves, that we do not want God to have that kind of power over us. If we make that choice, we can remember the fellow who came without proper attire to the wedding feast of the king.

We can refuse God's grace and stand in sin before judgment and we will be bound hand and foot and thrown out into the night where there will we weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth! That is our choice.

Mom was right. If we want to come to worship totally and completely in the presence of God, we do have to wear our Sunday best. That means, we have to dawn the garment of grace prepared for us and designed to fit us perfectly.

Our Sunday best may look strange to others, but it will look perfect to Christ who will recognize it and welcome us into the kingdom.

Today is pet Sunday. It is a day when animals come to worship with us. They have been quiet during the worship and I believe it is because they know they are in the very presence of God's Holy Spirit! I hope you will feel that presence today, don your garment and come!

Amen!