

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 12, 2023

Matthew 22:1-14

So, if you are joining us for the first time in this season of Lent, whether here in person or via live stream, we want you to be aware that we are moving through a Lenten series entitled Parables that Prepare Us. It's a mouthful. We understand that Jesus had a number of different teaching techniques, but perhaps his favorite one was the parable; and so we're going to read in just a moment from the Gospel of Matthew, the 22nd chapter, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. We're going to start in the first verse and go through the 14th. So let us listen together for God's word to each of us and to God's church this day.

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 slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 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." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated 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 slaves 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.'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. amen.

I was about 12 months into ministry when a pastor from the Methodist church across the street gave me a call. He knew what the Presbyterians were paying me as an associate pastor. We have this phrase in Presbyterian polity called "Presbytery minimum," and that's what I was at. And so he knew that I would probably benefit from a, a side hustle, as it were. He had a business of his own. It was an adventure weddings business. Pastor Troy would marry you in the midst of your

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skydiving; he would put on a parachute with you. The three of y'all would be together, and he would do the ceremony right there in the air if you were that sort of adventurer. If you were a scuba diver, he'd do it under water. He said, "Listen, I get so many of these really cool applications. This is something you're going to want to do. Would you be my kind of second guy? Would you take all the overflow?" I said, "Absolutely!" So in my first two years of ministry, I did about 30 weddings a year. I did about 60 weddings total. That would mean that I would spend most of my Saturdays outside of Madison, Georgia, where I used to live. The interesting part is I, I never did a skydiving wedding or a scuba diving wedding or really any weddings that were very fun. It turns out that Pastor Troy didn't want someone to do adventure weddings with him. He wanted to do all the fun things and give all the other ones to the young associate pastor, but I enjoyed it, and I learned a whole lot. And what was really fun was I got to meet a ton of really interesting people to be a part of this holy beginning for couples as they began a new season of life together, as they made promises to each other as well. But being a "pastor for hire" or an officiant for hire, um, it also meant that I only got to kind of swoop in there at the very end, do the ceremony, and then leave. But these families, they often felt like they wanted to keep me around for a little bit longer, so they would invite me to the reception, really hoping I wouldn't come. But then they would say, "Would you just open us with, uh, you know, maybe a blessing or something like that?" So I'd do that, and I made it this habit that I would go to the reception but just for a little while. I'd go for like the first 30 minutes. I'd say a prayer, and then I'd be a fly on the wall; and I would learn in those first 30 minutes what I thought the rest of the reception was going to be like. If everyone was kind of uptight and the music was a little slow, I had a feeling that I knew the party was not going to be a memorable one. If folks dove right in, if cake got maybe pushed into the face of a someone who had just gotten married, or if there was some, some fun in the air, I'd imagine that I'd be missing something by driving home. I could tell within the first few minutes I thought, about what the party was going to look like. If it started off dull or some other way that's how it was going to end.

This wedding banquet in the gospel of Matthew does not start off very well. The guests have been invited; the table has been prepared. You see on the front of your bulletin there Zoe's beautiful artwork depicting the kings seated at the table all alone. The fatted calf and the oxen have been slain. We read in scripture together that everything is ready and no one shows up.

Unexpected for this king—all the time and the energy, let alone the money that he's put into this. He sends his servants out into the community. "Go collect everyone who's been invited; tell them the feast is ready. Come and enjoy the wedding banquet."

and so the servants go and do that but no one comes scripture says that one goes out into the field another goes to their business others make all sorts of different excuses you might imagine still others sees these servants treat them badly and end up killing them

the guests it seems at the very least take their invitation to the Wedding Banquet for granted

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why didn't they come I asked myself this week maybe they just didn't think it mattered all that much scripture says they made light of it they found other things to do that were more important

I've been lucky enough to collect a number of kind of motherly and fatherly figures in my life and one of my adopted mothers lives back in in Georgia she used to make sure that I had a place to go as a single guy on on Easter afternoon for lunch on Christmas day in the morning she'd make sure I had a place to go if I wasn't going to be with my family but beyond that she mothered me in a whole lot of other ways I'd get to spend a whole lot of time around table with her and her family

we nurtured quite a relationship for about five years and she came to me one day and she said David we need to talk she said you're inching closer and closer to being taken off of my guest list

and that was perplexed a little bit

she said the last three times that I've invited you over for dinner your response has been I think I can make it and then you leave it at that

it seems like you're waffling a bit as to whether you want to spend time around table which is fine I want you to have good friendships and relationships and I want you to go and enjoy your life that's absolutely fine but it's it's getting to feel like I'm your fallback option nothing else better comes up then you know you have a seat at the table you're inching closer and closer to being taken off the list

that sent a shock through me kind of shook me back to reality I didn't want her to feel that way

but more so than that I wanted to appreciate the invitation for what it was having other plans was fine but being wishy-washy not so much

the king takes every opportunity to invite the people not just to invite them to send them RSVPs that they probably turned in early but also to go out and seek them the feast is ready the king says come and enjoy the wedding feast and when they don't do that the king is angry it's a hard thing to make sense of in this text the king is equally generous and cruel

when they mistreat his servants they are slaughtered as well and their town is burned he takes the guest list and he puts a match to it

then the king does something else the king decides to expand the invitation to widen the circle of those who are welcomed into the kingdom banquet his servants go out into the street again they find a ton of folks good and bad scripture says what's that mean

good and bad and they come and they fill the wedding hall and they begin you imagine to enjoy the food

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and if the story ended there we'd enjoy it but the gospel writer and Jesus just have to keep going just a few more verses

the King comes upon the banquet finds one not dressed appropriately asks how do you even get in here and then it ends with weeping and gnashing of teeth after he's been bound and thrown into the outer Darkness

it seems that to be invited is not the end of the story the invitation is not an end into itself or unto itself the invitation it turns out even for those who have been invited late to the party it asks something of them demands something of them they can show up but they have to do so in a particular way they have to be clothed appropriately

Paul speaks to this in Galatians chapter 3 verse 27 where the community is told as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ

and later in Colossians chapter 3 verse 12 as God's chosen ones holy and beloved clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness humility and meekness and patience the invitation actually asks something of you you're not just on the list so you can enjoy the food and the band you are to come in a particular way the imitation draws something out of you you are to be clothed Paul says in compassion kindness humility meekness and patience

but there's one at this party who doesn't get it

he's very excited to be invited but he hasn't clothed himself as he's been told he ends up in the outer Darkness not how he imagined his day would end storing Kierkegaard a theologian from a couple centuries ago he I think gives us good direction around this particular context and what it is that the invitation of God draws from us he says I a follower is or strives to be what he admires an admirer however keeps himself personally detached he fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires Kierkegaard sets up this idea that when you are invited you can either be an admirer or a follower and Jesus is not interested in admirers Jesus is interested in followers those willing to understand that the invitation has things attached to it the grace is free but discipleship claims us the admirer never makes any true sacrifices Kierkegaard says he plays it safe though in words phrases songs he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ he renounces nothing will not reconstruct his life will not let his life Express what it is he supposedly admires but not so for the follower no no the follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires

somewhere along the line of doing those 60 some odd weddings

took on this practice

I think I kind of stole it from a pastor I liked it when they did it but I made it my own it was it was kind of a part of what I did somewhere in the midst of probably the homily I would invite the couple to turn around I've married a handful of folks here and sometimes I've asked you all to

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do that too I would invite the bride and the groom to turn around and to see the wonderful Congregation of people that had gathered that day I did most of these weddings and Vineyards and sometimes and then uh in breweries and on tops of mountains they would turn around and there might be 10 people there there might be a hundred people there but they would see the gathered congregation there I say each of these people has come here they've spent great money and time they have traveled long distance to come here to witness together the ceremony today but that is not the only reason that they are here they are not just here to be admirers of Your Love or the commitment that you make today they are here today because they are covenanting with you to support you in your marriage

after that first year when you feel like giving up you're going to call one of them and they're going to pick up the phone and they're going to encourage you to keep going they're going to nurture you and inspire you through your parenting or through your travels or through your work whatever it is

and I would likewise tell the congregation you're not just here to enjoy some good food and cake and an open bar you are here to make promises to this couple promising to uphold and to support them not just to celebrate them

something is being asked of you your invitation comes with a qualification

discipleship likewise asks something of us faith that does not demand something of you is not Faith beloved

the question then becomes what is it that this invitation of Christ into Kingdom work what is it that it asks of us for some of us it might ask us to use our voices later this morning we will pray for our mission Partners Micah for some it will be to take on the mantle of advocacy through their work or through other community organizations

for others of you it will be to use the generous gifts that God has given to you to help shape this community in a new and generous way

others of you have time

and maybe you can use it to go and read to one of our adopt-a-school classrooms over at Idlewild Elementary or maybe you can use it to help continue our formation here at Idlewild or maybe you can use it in countless other ways each of you each of us has been given an invitation but is actually unique to us only you brought your particular set of gifts and skills into this place today and this season of Lent gives us space to ask ourselves what is God asking of us or more personally

what is God's invitation to me asking of me whatever the invitation is not the end of this we are not here to admire we are here to be followers of Jesus Christ in this season of Lent we have this

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special time to sit in quiet and to ponder what that invitation of Our Lord is drawing out of us right now

I wonder if you chose to not take this invitation for granted I wonder how might God use you to bring about this Kingdom of Heaven that the parable teaches us about

I thought that I could learn everything I needed to know about the Wedding Banquet from the first 30 minutes

turns out God always has different plans for that celebration that the guest list is ever expanding wider and wider that those who you think are in aren't going to show up and those on the outside are actually bringing the best their best selves to the work here

there is invitation in this parable but there is also a claim on our lives if we are to be those who help to build the Kingdom of Heaven Here and Now then God demands something of us my prayer for you as you go into your week this week is that you might spend time reflecting on praying on pondering over what that demand looks like right now for if we are to build the kingdom each who has responded to the invitation must bring their full selves not to admire the Elegance of the party the food the drink the band but to be transformed by the very spirit of God and work in US calling us to something more in the name of the father and the Son and the Holy Spirit one God mother of us all amen