

"The Called and the Chosen"  
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian New Canaan – October 11, 2020

PLEASE READ:  
Isaiah 25:1-9  
Matthew 22:1-14

Once upon a time there were two small boys, Peter and John, who loved to play together. One day they met an old man who they found to be incredibly wise. They would ask this old man questions and somehow, he would always come up with the right answers to their questions. Like most boys their age, Peter and John were good at getting into trouble: one day they decided they would try to come up with a question that their wise friend could not answer. John had an idea. "All we need to do is trick him," he began. "We can catch a dove and ask him, "Is it dead or alive?" If he says it is alive, you can squeeze your hands together and smother it, but if he thinks it is dead, you can release the bird and let it fly away."

Peter agreed, so they went off to catch a bird. Later they approached the man. Peter held the bird gently between his hands as he asked, "Sir, tell me, do you think this bird is dead or alive?" First the old man looked at the bird, then at the boys. No matter what he said, he knew he would be wrong. Finally, he answered, shaking his head, "Son, it will be whatever you want it to be." Peter opened his hands and the dove flew away...

In a week of terrible news with more foolishness in Washington; the plot by a white supremacy group to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Widmer, and start a Civil War; the continuation of real war between Azerbaijan and Armenia; and continuing growing numbers worldwide of CV-19 new cases and deaths, I was hoping for some relief in the texts this Sunday. Maybe the best news of the week is that we likely won't have to endure another presidential debate! Seriously, I suspect Jesus knew the job of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable... Well, the abrupt conclusion, "Many are called, but few are chosen" definitely makes me uncomfortable! So, let's look at it together. Maybe, "it will be whatever you want it to be."

The larger context of Matthew's narrative may offer a clue, for the parable and *non-sequitur* conclusion comes at the end of his critique and challenge to the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus' parable begins with an acknowledgement of who God really is, but it is also about who we really are....

The King invites a select guest list to the banquet in honor of his son's wedding. The initial guests twice refuse to come. Instead of enjoying the feast which the king had prepared, some were too busy with work and business, but some took aggressive action against the king's servants who brought the invitations. The word in the Greek translated into the English as "mistreated" is "ὕβρις" from which our word "hubris" comes. Its connotations are much darker in the Greek, as it implies not only arrogance, but scornful domination, even sexual violation. In the end, the King's servants were killed.

Naturally the king was upset, and he repaid in kind those who had shamefully abused and killed his servants. From a first century perspective, the King is justified in destroying those murderers and their cities. This parable is most likely a metaphor for Jewish history where God's people have killed the prophets. It is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own mistreatment and death, and perhaps even of the final destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, an event with which the Gospel writer would have been familiar.

But there are also straightforward theological truths here. Our God is a God of gracious invitation, but also a God of justice. Those who turn against the King in this parable choose their own destruction. Jesus implies those who treat God and God's messengers with contempt, who would treat with scorn the invitation to celebrate with the King will also receive judgment. The very unpleasant fact of the matter is, however distasteful to our "it's all good" culture, is that Jesus talks more about God's judgment than salvation in the Gospels. Put very simply, our choice whether or not to receive God's invitation or to spurn God will have ultimate significance for us, especially because it was the religious folk to which this parable was originally addressed.

What is more troubling than even this sobering reminder of God's justice, is the conclusion to the parable. After the King dispenses with the first guest list, he orders his servants to invite to the marriage feast "as many as you find." They go out into the street and gathered all whom they found, "both bad and good." This sounds good at first, for indeed we recognize our God calls the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Truth be told, we're worse off than we think. I love the story of Charles Spurgeon, British Baptist preacher who was outside the door greeting people after worship one Sunday. A woman came up to him and started complaining, "You are one of the most arrogant, ill-tempered, pig-headed men I know!" To which he replied, "Madam, you don't know the half of it!"

Jesus might remind us, no one is good except God. Paul wrote, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The prophet Isaiah lamented that all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags before God. We need to repent of not only our evil deeds, but also our good deeds we use to justify ourselves, or to judge others as less than ourselves.

Which brings us to the fellow found to be without a wedding garment who is thrown into the outer darkness; where he and others will "weep and gnash their teeth." What is just about this punishment for a seemingly innocent oversight of dress etiquette? The poor fellow didn't ask to come, he was invited off the street for heaven's sake!

First, we must remember the middle east concept of "being clothed." Clothes showed to whom you showed allegiance, and you could often tell your ethnic or religious group by your clothes. Now, I am still way too new here to venture into politics, but perhaps even more dangerous is the topic of sports teams! I'm told that around here you are either a Yankees, Red Socks fan. Is that right? I imagine this guy showing up at the wedding celebration without the right clothes on is *like a Yankee fan showing up at a Red Socks Party on game day*. He's going to get thrown out and roughed up!

The apostle Paul talks about being clothed in Christ's righteousness, that we should *put on* the whole armor of God, etc. The garment is symbolic of the inner attitude towards the bridegroom, or our respect for God's son, the bridegroom of the church. (Revelations 19:8, etc.) Do we have an attitude of reverent celebration and thanksgiving, or do we come before God clothed in our own arrogant conceptions of goodness and worthiness?

One of my favorite summaries of the gospel: "Cheer up! Your situation is far worse than you could have imagined. But cheer up! God's love for you is far greater than you could have hoped."

This parable also has two edges to it... It reminds us of God's lavish love, that all are welcome, and that we are not chosen for invitation because of how good we are. In fact, self-righteousness is a recipe for disaster. We are called because of God's grace, and because God wants for us and all people a better life and a fairer world.

In Matthew's gospel it is clear that Jesus has come to feed us. He has fed the five thousand and the four thousand. The Kingdom of heaven is about food, and especially, food for the hungry. But Jesus doesn't just throw rolls of bread at us. He prepares a *banquet feast!* It's about the generosity of God and lavish grace for all. All are invited to the party. The outsiders are welcomed, everyone had a good time and went home.

We'd all have been relieved if Jesus just stopped there with his parable. But it's more complicated than that. It's the *King* throwing the banquet. There is the gospel of God's gracious welcome, but there is also the gospel of our obedience, of both faith *in* this gracious God and faithful response *to* the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. This interrelation of grace and justice is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ...

Karl Barth, puts it this way... "The epilogue (which is wrongly conjured away by many exegetes) tell us about the individual who certainly came, but came without a wedding-garment, and it shows that in the last resort it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all. Reluctant obedience to God's command is not obedience..."<sup>1</sup>

Let's not miss the obvious point here: A wedding banquet is supposed to be a good time of joy and celebration. But too often Christians and Christian communities have lost the joy factor of the gospel. You've heard the definition of a Puritan? "A Puritan is a Christian who is afraid that someone, somewhere, may be having a good time!"

That's why, Barth goes on to say, "the wedding guests – the disciples of Jesus in contrast to those of John and the Pharisees – cannot fast when the Bridegroom is with them (Mark 2:19) .... How can any part of what Jesus demands of Christians be rightly done if in the first instance it is not done with *joy*, as an 'ought' whose seriousness lies at the bottom in the fact that it is a 'may,' something permitted?"

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (book II.2), 588.

I love Charles Wesley's old hymn lyrics, "To know the love of Christ proclaimed, to hear his pardoning voice: Changes a slave into a child, and duty into choice..."

And so, we are left with Jesus' conclusion, "Many are called, but few are chosen." Here, I think, Jesus is acknowledging the fact that our God is a gracious and merciful God, a God who welcomes anyone who will come. But all who come before the King are to be clothed in the righteousness, the justice of his Son. If we would be chosen, we must put on Christ, and live our lives in obedience to his love and justice for all.

So, in the end, perhaps "it will be whatever you want it to be." You are all *called*, but how you choose will determine whether you are *chosen* or not... Richard Rohr wrote recently, "To pray and actually mean 'Thy Kingdom come,' we must also be able to say 'my kingdoms go.' Shall we let go of our prejudices, and welcome those whom God welcomes? Shall we choose hope over cynicism, joy over despair, amazing grace and infinite mercy over judgment? Perhaps this is the mandate that comes with the King's Party. The gospel sets us free to be slaves of Christ; obliging us to choose love, justice, hope and welcome for all. And the dress code for the party is Christ's joyful righteousness alone.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*