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October 9, 2011

“A Family Celebrates”

Exodus 22:1 – 14

Matthew 22:1 – 14

Text: “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.” . . . Matthew 22:10

Let’s begin with the fact that everyone is invited to the greatest of all banquets, the greatest party you can ever imagine! You are invited, I am invited, and so are the poorest of the poor, the richest of the rich, those who snub the Bible, and those who try to be the very most religious.

John Wesley called it prevenient grace. God extends to everyone an invitation to accept God’s love.

Rob Bell, in his book, *Love Wins*, says that the invitation from God is open to all. It’s hard sometimes to understand that all means all. Sometimes we want to limit all – all who worship like we do; all who live in this country; all who live in our neighborhood. But to God, all means all: people from every nation, people good and bad, sinners and – well we are all sinners.

In the traditional communion liturgy the Words of Assurance read, “Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love for us.”

Sometimes it is hard for us to come to grips with the fact that God created the whole universe and everything in it, and intended it all to be good. Sometimes we just want there to be good guys and bad guys. Right and wrong. Well, maybe I am taking it a step too far. Let’s peek in on the Scripture for today.

Moses, in today’s story from Exodus, tells a story about the God’s people, the Israelites. They were all given a gracious freedom from enslavement from the Pharaoh of Egypt. It was a miraculous escape – you know that story. The waters parted and the Israelites, racing ahead of the Egyptians, made it safely to the other side, the Pharaoh’s troops got stuck in the mud. And then the Hebrew people found themselves wandering for 40 – not days, not weeks, not months, but 40 years, wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. Some invitation to a celebration this was.

Then to top it all off, Moses, the leader that freed them into this miserable wilderness, goes off by himself up on a mountain, presumably to talk to God. He stays up there a long time, much longer than expected. And the Hebrew people are now really getting antsy. And they talked among themselves: “Who is this God that left us in this wilderness. Slavery was much better – we had food, we had water, we had shelter. Now we don’t even know where we are going.” They said to Aaron,

“Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” (vs.1b)

And Aaron, Moses' brother, helps them melt down all their jewelry and make a golden calf. And the people have a great celebration worshipping this new god! A god they could actually see! A god that represented all they wanted – security, wealth, the good life. And that family of a god (a golden calf god) celebrated.

But when God found out about this; said to Moses,

“Your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them . . .”

And that sets the scene for the gospel lesson from Matthew. It takes place during the last week of his ministry, while in Jerusalem, while fending off the growing charges against Him, and the parable is again addressed to the chief priests and elders, this time in another parable. And Jesus does not mince words about what this is about!

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

The Great Wedding Banquet that a king is holding for his son. Given that Jesus is addressing the chief priests and elders, the parallels are clear – the King is God, and the son is Jesus. This is the marriage of Christ and God's people – the church. It is time for the family to celebrate!

So the King sends out the invitations. I suspect the invitations initially went to those to whom we would send out invitations for a wedding – the favored people; the immediate family and friends. In this parable these invitations clearly went to the people Jesus was addressing with parable; the good church people of the day – the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the Pharisees. But those people apparently didn't fill out their RSVPs.

I can relate to that. I think I would be described as a good church person and more than once, I have forgotten or misplaced the RSVP card; and more than once have had it done to me. I don't think I am alone in this.)

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet; but they would not come.”

And the guests on the initial guest list would not come. So he sent out his slaves to tell them how much it meant to the king, instructing them to say,

“Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet!”

WOW - A second invitation. This must be very important. Usually, if I don't have something more important to do, I will relent and go; and when I see how important it is to the person giving the party, more than likely, I will go with enthusiasm.

“But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.”

OK! OK! They had previous engagements; they live in the fast paced world of Washington! Too many things to do. They couldn't do everything. That's understandable. I get it! The great enemy of faith and salvation even to this day is preoccupation. God is simply crowded out. We do not disbelieve in God. Nor do we despise God. Not really. We simply have no time for God. We are not irreligious. We're just busy. And we are tired. Other matters are pressing and heaven can always wait.

Hmmm, wait a minute! What was that last line? Read it again!

“while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.”

Sheesh! It's one thing just not to show up; but quite another to mistreat and kill the postal workers for delivering the invitation! Why did Jesus sneak that line into the story?!?!

It seems that this family celebration has gone very, very, bad!

But that was exactly the parallel Jesus was drawing to help the good church people of the day to understand the crisis of faith that existed. The Hebrew people had rejected the prophets and tried to kill them, and now Jesus was in the very last days of His earthly ministry.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed the murderers, and burned their city.

OK, now I get it. If you don't do what God wants He will “Zap” You! This is the kind of God I can relate to – there are consequences that have to be reckoned with. God delivers judgment if we don't live according to God's plan.

Then [the king] 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.”

I wonder if the slaves might have reasoned like I might: “Well, I know he said invite everyone, but I also know the original “favored” guest list so I think I know the kind of people he really wants.”

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.

Wow – doesn't it almost leave you speechless? I mean everyone? Both good and bad? Doesn't the God have any sense of propriety? These aren't the consequences I expected. Everyone? Why some of the people I tend to frown upon might be invited.

So let's pause and see where we are. First of all are the first-invited guests – they are all recipients of the king's favor. By the king's gracious invitation he had said to every last one of them, “you're ok in my book; I want you at my party.” You see what is key about this parable is the invitation – both as a source of grace, and as a source of judgment.

Secondly, the replacement guests are likewise recipients of the king's favor. Apparently (and perhaps ignoring our own sensibilities) the king doesn't care what they

look like or even smell like. The king doesn't make any stipulations at all, they only have to accept the invitation. The king and God are party people and will only take "Yes!" for an answer. All they have to do is say yes.

There has to be more to the story than this.

And there is.

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?'

There is a third part – and that is the man who is without the wedding garment. You see nobody in this parable is outside the king's favor; everybody starts out being , as far as the king is concerned, irrevocably in.

So up until the king notices this guy at the party who doesn't have a wedding robe on: nobody is kicked out who wasn't already in. Hell may be an option; but if it is, it is the one that given us only after we have already received the entirely non-optional gift of sitting together at God's great banquet. Put it all together and we have this scene: we, like the guests, may cease to care about our acceptance, but God never has a change of heart about having offered us acceptance in the first place.

But what about the guy who didn't have a proper robe? Can you blame him? I mean, he got the invitation at the last minute – and he might have been so poor as not to be able to afford one. Isn't this a bit severe?

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.

Hmmmm. Why would he be speechless? There are any number of responses he might have made; namely, "I couldn't afford one." "I got the invitation so late, I didn't have time to change." "I thought that being here was more important than what I wear."

But . . .

And he was speechless.

If he had said anything, anything at all – even for the worst reasons, he would have put himself in some sort of relationship with the king; and he would have been alright. There is no excuse that the king couldn't have forgiven. But because the man said nothing – because he would not bring himself to relate to the king in anyway – all reassures the king that this man has already rejected the gracious invitation. With no response, the king cannot even forgive him. It is so true – hate is not the opposite of love, apathy is.

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."

And for those of you who are looking for judgment – well, here it is. Judgment has the last word here. But the judgment is not delivered by the king – it is delivered by the one who refuses to be in relationship to the king. The judgment stems from the man's refusal of grace. As Robert Capon wrote, "For hell, ultimately, is not the place for punishment for sinners; sinners are not punished at all; they go straight to heaven just for saying yes to grace. Hell is simply the nowhere that is the only thing left for those who will not accept their acceptance by grace."¹

For many are called, but few are chosen.

And then there is this last line. Well, we can see that the king has called every one – that's the many are called part. God's invitation is universal. Everybody was invited to the party. Both good and bad.

But few are chosen.

So here we are at the end of this story. All are invited; but secondly few will respond – they are busy doing other things; but God will persist and will still invite everyone; but here is Jesus' sobering word: In the end the king chooses who can stay. That's our Lord's third and final point.

If the Pharisees and Sadducees had listened to the story closely they would have heard the part about the guy who came to the reception without the proper attire and was consequently thrown out. The doors are open to all, but the king reserves the right to choose who can stay. I believe Jesus was warning us that we must be properly prepared. This parable tells of the duty of preparedness for the summons of God, and the garments stand for the preparation that must be made. Let me ask, what will you be wearing to the king's reception? The invitation has gone out. The time has come. Let me suggest, in the words of the Apostle Paul, that you clothe yourself with Christ.

But . . . you know what most of us do. We get suspicious, we get cynical; but more than that, we still look for that big scoreboard in the sky to see if we have yet earned our way to get the invitation in the first place. This is a deal that is too good to be true! God saves me. Me a miserable wretch that has made more mistakes in a lifetime than you can shake a stick at. How can God forgive even me. I just don't believe it. My ledger sheet shows many more failings than it does good deeds.

But God has invited you! God has given you grace – a free gift with no strings attached!

The only catch is, we have to be as crazy as God to take the deal, because our every instinct will be to distrust such a foolish arrangement. And that gets us back to the parable of a king throwing a party no self-respecting king would.

It represents a God who makes a deal with us so outrageous that it is hard to get our respect and attention. And we have to be crazy enough to understand that we're in – not because we earned it, but because God gives it. Not because we can ignore it, but because refusing this crazy gift by **not** honoring it and being prepared by **not** living such grace in our lives will get us bounced out.

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989. P. 127.

It is all about judgment. But in this parable we can clearly see who does the judging. And if you still don't get who does the judging; try looking in the mirror.

And now maybe you understand why Jesus said back in Sermon on the Mount,

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” (Matthew 7:1 – 2)

Amen?