

WE'RE HERE FOR THE PARTY!

Matthew 22:1-14

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2014
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

"Many are called, but few are chosen..."

Old William Barclay, the great Scots Bible scholar, says that this passage is really not one parable, but two, and that we do well to take them separately (*Matthew, Volume 2, page 294.*)

Each of the parables of Jesus has different layers of meaning. I once heard Tom Long, arguably one of the best preachers of my generation, say that a parable of Jesus is like an onion: you peel away one layer and there is another layer underneath, and then another, and another.

For this parable, the first meaning is yet another accusation of the Jews. Jesus once again restates the history of Israel, its rejection of God and God's prophets, and Barclay sums it up well by writing: "Ages ago they had been invited by God to be (the) chosen people; yet when God's Son came into the world, and they were invited to follow Him, they contemptuously refused the invitation. The result was that the invitation of God went out direct to the highways and byways; and the people in the highways and the byways stand for the sinners and the Gentiles, who never expected an invitation into the kingdom of God." (*Ibid.*)

The next layer of meaning goes beyond the Jews at the time of Jesus, and reminds us that the invitation of God to be a part of God's kingdom is a joyous thing, an invitation to a feast, a banquet, a party. "To think of Christianity as a gloomy giving up of everything which brings laughter and sunshine and happy fellowship to life is to mistake its whole nature. It is to joy that the Christian is invited; and it is joy (that one) misses if (one) refuses the invitation." (*Ibid., p. 295*)

Robert Day Miller, who retired as the executive of Coastal Carolina Presbytery, once said that we Christians are the Harlem Globetrotters of the world religions. We've won. When the final buzzer blows, we will be victorious. So we should enjoy the game of life, laugh, pass the ball around, let everybody shoot, and have a great time.

But if you showed the world a picture of the Harlem Globetrotters and a copy of Grant Wood's famous *American Gothic*, that lovely couple with a pitchfork, and asked "Which best represents the Christian church?" which one do you think would be picked most often?

We sometimes think of the kingdom of God as existing only in heaven, and there being no joy on this earth, only in heaven. That's wrong. The joy is to be found wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ.

And yes, heaven will be more joyous. I found myself singing the other morning, as I was taking the handful of pills that I take every morning, that there'll be no pills in heaven. And I'm reminded of the woman who woke up the other morning, and said to her husband, who was lying beside her in bed, "Don't touch me, I'm dead and this must be heaven."

"How do you know you're dead?" he asked.

"Because nothing hurts," she replied.

Yet another level of meaning in this parable reminds us that not everything that separates us from Christ, that causes us to decline the invitation to the kingdom, is intrinsically bad or evil. One man went off to his farm, the other to his business. And there are folks who do that every day, every Wednesday, every Sunday, every other day of the week, who put other things ahead of the call of the kingdom.

Yet another level of meaning is the focus of this parable: it isn't really upon punishment, but rather upon what is missed. The joy of being in the kingdom, the fun and fellowship and the pure love of the church is missed by those who turn their back on the invitation, who are too busy, too distracted. Like Gretchen Wilson sings, "We're Here for the Party!"

Finally, this parable reminds us that God's invitation is an invitation to grace. Those who were brought in to the banquet after the invited guests failed to show were not people who expected to be included at the fancy sit down dinner honoring the groom. They were strangers, sinners, outcasts, and yet they received hospitality and warmth, bounty and grace, when they got to the wedding feast.

All except for one. And that is the second parable, with its own layers of meaning.

When I first read that parable, I'm reminded of the question asked by the comedian George Goble: "Did you ever feel like the world was wearing a tuxedo, and you were a pair of brown shoes?"

This parable fits in with a couple of rabbinical parables about kings and garments. One has to do with preparation and the other with purity. In the first, the king tells his subjects that there will be a banquet, a feast, but not when it will be. And his instructions are that they should all be prepared all of the time, so they go about in their best robes, bathed, anointed, dressed, ready, until the invitation comes. That is the parable of preparation. The other is that the king gives every one in the kingdom a garment. Some put them away. Some keep them clean. Others wear them out, or get them dirty, soiled, stained. But one day the king asks for them back, and those who return theirs in good order are rewarded for their care, but the others are cast into prison. This is the parable of purity.

When the Jews heard the parable about the guest who didn't have on a wedding robe, they heard it in the context of those two familiar parables.

But old Willie Barclay has another layer of meaning to add: "Jesus has just said that the king, to supply his feast with guests, sent his messengers into the highways and byways to gather (them) in. That was the parable of the open door. It told how the Gentiles and sinners would be gathered in. This parable strikes the necessary balance. It is true that the door is open to all., but when they come they must bring with them a life which seeks to fit the love which has been given to them. Grace is not only a gift; grace is a grave responsibility. A man cannot go on living the life he lived before he met Jesus Christ. He must be clothed in a new purity and a new holiness and a new goodness. The door is open, but the door is not open that the sinner may come and remain a sinner, but that the sinner may come and become a saint." (p. 298)

Now I disagree with Barclay a little: we are called from our sins to be saints, to be sure, but we are still sinners, just forgiven.

It isn't the clothes that make the man; it is the attitude which those clothes represent. I remember a young man who showed up in church one Christmas Eve in his brand new camouflage hunting outfit. Some might have been offended by that, thinking that he was just stopping by the church on the way to the deer camp. Or that he put no more value on the church than the woods. But I understood: these were new clothes, the newest this young fellow had. They were a gift, and they were his pride and joy. So he wore his "best" to come and worship God, not to show off his gift, but to celebrate the gift of love.

It matters not what is worn on the outside, it is the preparation and the purity on the inside.

“It is too often the case that we go into God’s house with no preparation at all; if every man and woman in our congregation came to church prepared to worship, after a little prayer, a little thought, and a little self-examination, then worship would be worship indeed--the worship in which and through which things happen in (our) souls and in the life of the church and in the affairs of the world. (p.299)

The invitation to the kingdom is for everyone, but being subject to the king requires preparation and commitment. One can’t just come to the party. One can’t just show up.

Every once in a while, someone will show up after church, looking for help, a room for the night, a meal, gasoline. We try help them. But I always want to ask: “Why weren’t you here to worship? Why weren’t you here to pray? Why weren’t you here for the party?” You’ve missed the best part. We’ll help you, but the help of the Lord you might have received is so much richer, better, more, than anything I could ever do for you.”

Let us pray.

Lord, help us to hear your call to the kingdom, your invitation to the wedding feast, and to be prepared in our hearts and minds and lives to come to the party at any moment in our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.