

October 15, 2023
Rev. Lisa Schrott
Isaiah 25:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-10
The Church Exists to Invite

We are continuing our sermon series digging deeper into our mission statement here at PCO. We begin with the certainty that we belong to God, and because nothing can separate us from the love of God, we are freed to serve God in this world; freed to be the church - that is Christ's hands, feet and voice in this world. Our mission statement reminds us that the church exists to invite us into a lifelong journey of faith. As we heard in our time with children, for many of us, this journey began with the sacrament of baptism when we were invited to become a member of the community of faith. And it is in this sacrament where the congregation is invited to make a promise to nurture a lifelong faith for those being baptized.

Our New Testament text this morning is a parable about invitation - about invitation rejected and about invitation accepted. Hear now these words from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, The Parable of the Wedding Banquet:

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. The king sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again the king 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 those invited made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest of those invited seized the king's slaves, mistreated 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We've all been there: You have a seven-wedding summer and just got your eighth invitation in the mail. Do you really have to RSVP yes? Well according to *Glamour* magazine¹, there are *10 Legit Reasons Not to Go to a Wedding*. They include that it is your ex's wedding; you haven't spoken to the bride or groom since middle school; you don't think the couple should get married and are seriously considering raising your hand during the "Does anyone object..." portion of the ceremony; you're actually in another wedding that same day; you've already

¹Lindsey Unterberger. Wedding Excuses: 10 Legit Reasons Not to Go to a Wedding. *Glamour*. March 22, 2011; online at <https://www.glamour.com/gallery/wedding-excuses-10-legit-reasons-not-to-go-to-a-wedding>

been to the bride's or groom's first, second and third weddings; and you got the invitation months after the rest of your friends. Hellooo, B-list invite."

Well our parable this morning doesn't quite make it clear what the excuse was for not attending the wedding of the king's son, but the scripture certainly indicates that those invited either dismissed the invitation "But those invited made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business" or were downright hostile "while the rest of those invited seized the king's slaves, mistreated them, and killed them." I don't think the arbiters of etiquette would approve of these responses. I am also not sure how they'd feel about the king's response: "The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city."

But then the king flips the script. The king says that those initially invited were not worthy of the invitation, so he tells his servants to go into the streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet. And the servants did just that – they went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Invitations rejected. Invitations accepted. This parable (and a similar one, albeit less harsh, in the Gospel of Luke) have been thought of through the centuries as allegories – stories with hidden meanings. The kingdom of heaven is like...the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast. A great banquet. The parable has been used, and I think too frequently abused, as an allegory of salvation. This morning though, I want to focus on the invitation.

Invitations are risky matters. They are risky for the ones doing the inviting – the risk of rejection and looking foolish are real, as we see in this parable. For the one invited, accepting an invitation may bring you out of your comfort zone into unfamiliar territory. And rejecting an invitation may damage a valued relationship.

Invitations are risky because they involve choices. Who makes the cut for the guest list and who is left off? Who am obligated to invite and who do I want to invite? And for the invitee – choices abound about available time and resources. Accepting one invitation may limit your ability to accept other invitations – may be even invitations for events you have a greater desire to attend or with people who you'd rather be with it. Invitations are risky matters. In some ways demands that you show up and be present are easier because you don't have to make the choice.

And yet, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who invites guests to a wedding banquet. Who invites, not demands. The Greek verb used in the text for invite "kaleo" has layers of meaning. It can mean to offer hospitality through an invitation, but it can also mean "to urgently invite someone to accept responsibilities for a particular task, implying a new relationship to the one who does the calling - to be called to a task."²

² Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene A. Nida (Eds.) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Accordance Bible Software version 13.3.4; October 2022. OakTree Software. Inc.

The kingdom of heaven is like...the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast. A great banquet. It is an invitation to abundance. An invitation to celebrate. An invitation to be called to dine with Jesus. An invitation to accept a relationship with the triune God that leads to a lifelong journey of faith. A journey of faith that will have valleys along with the summits; that will have plenty of tears to go along with the joys. We will enjoy a feast around the table, but the other guests may not be who we expect.

This is the message Jesus was trying to convey to his disciples. The Gospel of Matthew is oriented around how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, the Messiah who will usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. I shared a few weeks ago the structure of the Gospel of Matthew – that the book move from proclaiming the kingdom to extending the kingdom to recognizing there was rising opposition to the kingdom, which led Jesus to teach on the authority of the kingdom. In chapter 19, the Gospel of Matthew makes a pivot as Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus now starts more explicit teaching about the “Coming of the Kingdom” preparing the disciples for what lies ahead.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet comes from this section. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and the day before the telling of this parable, drove the vendors and money changers from the Temple grounds, and in the process criticized and offended the religious authorities. These religious leaders now challenge Jesus’ authority, attempting to entrap him three times. And three times Jesus responds with a parable. The Wedding Banquet parable is the final of the three parables. And while Jesus is addressing the chief priests and the elders of the law, he is also addressing his disciples and the crowds that followed them, preparing them for what will soon lay ahead.

And while we often read the Gospels as if they were being written contemporaneously with Jesus’ ministry, we recognize that they were actually written many years after Jesus’ death. As one commentator has noted, “Matthew wrote his gospel not long after the brutal Roman defeat of a Jewish rebellion against the imperial occupation, during which the Roman army laid waste to the Jerusalem Temple. Part of what’s going on in this parable is Matthew and his community wrestling with how to make sense of that traumatic, world-shattering catastrophe.”³

That hits pretty to close to home this week, doesn’t it. The disciples are about to wrestle with how to make sense of the traumatic, world-shattering catastrophe that was Jesus arrest and crucifixion. The people of Matthew’s community were wrestling with how to make sense of the traumatic, world-shattering catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple. And for us here at PCO on a mid-October morning in 2023, we are trying to make sense of the traumatic, world-shattering catastrophes that surround us.

³ Salt Project Commentary. *Playing with Fire: Salt’s Commentary for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/5/playing-with-fire-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>

I appreciate how Pastor Richard Spalding has framed this parable with respect to the context of the times: “It may be that Matthew himself [the writer of the Gospel] is one of only a dwindling few who still remember what it was like to sit at those tables with Jesus – how arduous was the journey that led to that upper room, how they continued to dine on the reassurance and indelible grace of that meal through all of the hard time that followed. *Remember how it felt at that table*, he seems to say, even as the threats of violence and the vagaries of community continue to swirl around them. *We will feast again.*”⁴

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who invites guests to a wedding banquet. Invites guests to a great feast. A king who invites, not demands, a relationship. A king who gives us a choice to accept the invitation to the table of abundance or turn down the invitation. The invitation is risky – for it is an invitation to hope and not despair; an invitation to work for peace – for shalom and not for power and privilege; it is an invitation that asks us to be present with each other, even those we may not have much in common with or like very much; it is an invitation to be vulnerable and risk rejection when we reveal our fears and frustrations; it is an invitation to gratitude for all we have been, all we are, and all we will be. The church exists to invite us into a lifelong journey of faith that will transform us and the world. It is an invitation to believe that a new creation is not just possible, but that we are called to make it happen.

We hear about that new creation in the text from Isaiah 25 that Rebecca read this morning. Isaiah chapter 24 is one of the darkest chapters in scripture. It is an apocalyptic text, subtitled Impending Judgment on the Earth. It opens with these ominous words “Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.” This chapter describes how the earth dries up and withers; how the people are crushed - the mirth of the timbrels is stilled; the noise of the jubilant has ceased; the city of chaos is broken down; every house is shut up so that no one can enter. Desolation is left in the city; the gates are battered into ruins. The earth is utterly broken. If one needed a picture of what Isaiah 24 was depicting, one needs to look no further than the current pictures and videos we are seeing from Israel - Palestine.

And yet chapter 25 of Isaiah opens with these words of promise: “O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.” We hear that the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow. The Lord will destroy the cast over all peoples and will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces...”

We sang about the promise of this new creation in our first hymn this morning. “There is now a new creation through the grace of Jesus Christ, peace and reconciliation with the God of endless life. Come and join the celebration; come and join this happy feast; Jesus makes an

⁴ Richard E. Spalding. Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14. Pastoral Perspective. *Feasting on the Word, Year A. Vol. 4.*; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.) Westminster John Knox Press, 2011; p 168.

invitation to the greatest and the least.⁵

We are invited to a lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. We are invited to the abundant feast. We are invited to believe that a new creation is possible. We are invited to work to enact this new creation. And there is much work to do. As our words of preparation remind us, “When Christ invites us to be his disciples, and when he invites us to share the feast that he prepares, we are called to respond—expressing our commitment, sharing our gifts, offering our lives to God in thanksgiving and praise.”⁶ How is God calling you to respond?

We are entering into a season where we will be emphasizing our response to the invitation we have received from God. Our stewardship theme this year is Gratitude for the Past, the Present and the Future. As we prepare to celebrate our 60th anniversary as a congregation, we have much to be grateful for. This morning we will hear from Jill Tribell, a charter member of PCO reflecting on the place of this congregation for her and her family. In coming weeks we will hear expressions of gratitude for the present church and for the dreams we have for the future, dreams of helping all to grow in the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ.

The invitation has been offered. An invitation to dine with Jesus. An invitation to gratitude. An invitation to hope. An invitation to work toward a new creation, where tears are no more and peace abounds. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who invites guests to a wedding banquet. A king who invites, not demands. The choice is ours. Join me on prayer.

⁵ David Gambrell, author of text *There is Now a New Creation. Glory to God Hymnal* #774. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

⁶ David Gambrell. *RSVP: An Ongoing Invitation to Baptismal Discipleship*. Presbyterian Mission Agency