

“Both Good and Bad are Invited”
Matthew 22:1-14
Sunday, October 9, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Leonard Sweet tells this story about, “a family that moved into the neighborhood and the little country church decided to reach out to the family. When they arrived at the doorstep the members of the church were surprised to find that the family had 12 kids and were for the most part poor. They invited the family to services and said goodbye. Later that week the church responded to their need. They delivered a package to the family and said, ‘We want you to know that you and your entire family are welcome at our church anytime. We have bought you these gifts and we want you to feel comfortable and at ease in our congregation. We hope you can use these,’ and they left. The family opened the package to find 14 suits of clothing, beautiful clothes for every member of the family. Sunday came and the congregation waited for the family, and they waited. The family never showed. Wondering what could have possibly happened, after lunch the members of the church returned to the home and found the family just getting back, all dressed in their new clothes.

“‘We don’t mean to be nosey but we would like to know what happened. We had hoped to see you this morning in church,’ the leader of the church inquired.

“The father spoke up. He said, ‘Well, we got up this morning intending to come. And we sure do appreciate your invitation. But after we showered, shaved, and dressed, why we looked so proper we went to the Episcopal Church.’”

People don't always respond the way we'd like them to. A case in point is the parable from our gospel reading this morning.

Jesus' story could be accurately titled, "A Wedding Banquet Gone Horribly Wrong." The invited guests rape, torture and murder the King's messengers. The king sends armies to slaughter these murderous guests and burn their city. Not a very fun party.

I. Everyone Is Invited

Once the carnage is over, the King decides to invite everyone. I mean everyone. "Both good and bad," our scripture reading states.

I think you and I understand this concept – that everyone is invited to the King's wedding banquet. The wedding banquet is a common New Testament metaphor for the Church.

Everyone is invited into the Church.

We understand what this means. Everyone is welcome. The doors are wide open. Y'all come! It doesn't matter what you look like, or what you've done, or where you come from. You are welcome here!

We even have a slogan for this in the United Methodist Church: "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." We welcome everyone into this house of worship.

Of course, we can all think of people we would rather not welcome. Jesus' story names the worst of the worst – rapist-torturer-murderers. These are the folks on the "A" list!

The "B" list – where you and I come in – we can't be any worse than that, can we? The King agrees.

Drug addicts, prostitutes, embezzlers, bankers, lawyers, politicians – I'll stop there. But we could all add to the "B" list of "both good and bad" people who are welcomed once the King opens up the party to everyone.

Steven Molin, in his book, Terrible Parable, gives a good description of this idea. He writes:

“Several years ago in Atlanta Georgia, there was a terrific power wedding scheduled in a suburban church. A wealthy debutante was engaged to marry an equally wealthy businessman, and a lavish reception was to follow. Just hours before the wedding, the groom got cold feet; he left his bride – literally – standing alone at the altar. The wedding, of course, was cancelled. But what would they do with all that food? It had already been paid for and prepared. The Atlanta Constitution reported that buses were sent to the Salvation Army and several downtown shelters, and they brought street people to the country club, where they sampled fresh crab and lobster, and steamed baby carrots well into the night. The Kingdom of God IS a party.”

And everyone is invited.

II. Not Everyone Will Respond

The reality is, however, that not everyone will respond to the invitation.

When you and I invite someone to Church, we are extending the King’s invitation to the wedding banquet. We are messengers of Jesus, inviting everyone to the feast. We are inviting them to one hell of a great party.

And it feels discouraging when folks reject the invitation. We look at an empty seat in the pew next to us, and we feel like it should be filled. And we wonder why folks don’t accept the invitation.

One reason might be that we’re not being very good messengers. Maybe we haven’t invited anyone to church recently. Or maybe the invitation needs to be expressed in a different way. Maybe we need to go out into the neighborhoods of Yucaipa with a mission-oriented approach. Maybe we need to open our eyes and our ears to see and to hear the desperate need of

the people around us. Maybe we need to find new and creative ways to be with people in need.

Maybe we need to remember that “it’s not about us;” it’s about the hurting people of our mission field of Yucaipa-Calimesa-Beaumont. It’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about hurting people who do not yet know that they are welcomed guests at the King’s wedding banquet. They are welcomed guests in His church here on the corner of Beech and Adams.

Of course, the story I opened with – the one about the nice clothes and the defection to the Episcopalians – it applies here. We may reach out to folks in need, even give them new clothes to wear. Next thing we know, they’re active at the church up the road.

None of this is within our control. The way people respond to the invitation is not within our control. The only thing over which we have control is the extending of the invitation. We are called by Jesus, the King of the Wedding Banquet, the Lord of the Church, the Savior of the World – we are called by this Jesus to go out into the streets and to gather everyone we find, both good and bad.

In his book, Critical Decisions in Following Jesus, George S. Johnson tells this story:

“There was a doctor who received a call late at night to come to the hospital. Someone was near death and needed a physician's attention or death was certain. The hospital was 30 miles away in another town. The doctor dressed and took off in his car. At a stoplight a man jumped into his car, pulled a gun, and told the doctor to get out. ‘I need your car. Get out,’ was all he said. The doctor got out and had to find another way to get to the hospital. When he finally arrived the nurse met him and told him the woman just died. ‘You are too late, Doctor. But would you go and say a word to the husband. He is weeping uncontrollably in the family lounge.’ When the doctor entered the lounge he found the husband in a corner. To his great surprise he discovered that the husband was the very man who pulled the gun on him because he

needed his car.

“Sometimes we push out of our lives the very thing that can help us. It might be the church, it might be the Bible, Christian friends, a nudge to make a clear commitment. It might be taking the step of accepting the invitation to the marriage feast.”

If you are in this room this morning, you have at least taken the step of checking out the wedding feast, to see if it's for you. You've made the choice to test the waters, to see if you are truly welcomed into this fellowship, this family of Jesus Christ.

Now your task is to go deeper. Your task is to make a full commitment to the King, to the Lord of the feast.

III. The King Decides Who Will Stay

Everyone is invited. But not everyone will respond.

And the King decides who will stay at the banquet. A reference is made to proper attire in the parable. One must be wearing a wedding robe in order to remain at the feast. The wedding robe symbolizes repentance and a new life of good works. It is a symbol of baptism, a symbol of Christian commitment.

In Galatians 3:27 it says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Colossians 3:12 adds this thought: “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

The proper wedding attire for the King's banquet is to be clothed in the light of Christ, to be baptized in His name, and to show in our outward behavior that we have new life in him. We have chosen to behave with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Amy Bahnson, our Children's Ministries leader, shared this bit of Christian humor with me earlier this week. It comes from Pastor Scott H. Andrews of Shepherd of the Valley UMC in Indio:

Jesus is pictured sitting on a park bench in lovely garden surroundings. Imagine the famous painting of Jesus the Shepherd, holding the little lambs, with children clustered around him. Or the painting of Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. This picture is in that genre -- lush vegetation and deep, rich colors.

Jesus is talking with a young man who is also seated on the park bench, his backpack resting on the ground nearby. Jesus leans towards the young man and says with intensity, "No, I'm not talking about Twitter! I literally want you to follow me!"

We can't just come to the banquet and hang out. Jesus literally wants us to follow Him!

Deb Davidson, our Administrative Council chairperson, loaned me a book a while back; I haven't had a chance to read it yet, but I like the premise. It's entitled, Not a Fan, and it's written by Kyle Idleman. The idea is that Jesus does not want fans; He is looking for true followers. He's not talking about Twitter. He literally wants us to follow Him.

To follow Him requires depth of commitment and action. It requires a relationship with Jesus that goes beyond warm fuzzy feelings. It requires a relationship with Jesus that leads us out into the streets to invite everyone, no matter who they are, to come to the banquet.

It is committed, active living out of our faith that clothes us in the wedding robe the King is looking for. The King doesn't want fans at His party. He wants active, passionate believers who live out His call to serve the least and the lowest.

Scott Hoezee, in his book, Comments and Observations, refers to Jane Smiley's novel, A Thousand Acres, in which she, "shows readers a highly dysfunctional family which nevertheless

attended church each Sunday. Yet this is how the novel's narrator sums up this religious practice: "We came to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks."

Continues Hoezee: "When faith becomes a compartment of life instead of life's vibrant center, when you're just stopping off to put in your time or pay your respects, squeezing God in between everything else that you clearly value much more highly, then you reveal yourself as an ill-clad impostor. You haven't put on a festive wedding garment, you're still refusing to wear that funny party hat because you fail to realize that the kingdom of God is a high, holy, hilarious feast thrown by a king who has prepared the best of everything."

Jesus has prepared the best of everything for us. He has sent out the invitations. Everyone is invited. Who will respond? Who will be ready to wear their funny party hats?

Closing.

G. K. Chesterton used to say that, "Just going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car." To be a Christian takes action; it takes a daily commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Everyone is invited. Not everyone will respond. Jesus decides who will stay.

Respond today! Make sure that you have put on the wedding robes of repentance and baptism, and that you have made a true commitment to a new life of good works.

And then go and invite someone new to church this week. Get involved in mission to our neighborhood and to our community. Reach out and invite everyone you meet. Let them know that Jesus invites everyone to His banquet.

Jesus decides who will stay. "Many are called but few are chosen." He wants you to be among those who party with Him throughout eternity.

If you have questions about how to know Him better, how to serve Him more fully, and how to go deeper in your commitment to Him, I invite you to get started by talking with me or with one of our church leaders, or by calling the church office. You are invited to become a more integral part of the ministry of this church.

Come to the Party! Jesus invites you! He stands at the door, ready to welcome you, with a party hat that fits you just right!

Amen.