

## **Pentecost 19A, Proper 23. October 15, 2017. Matthew 22:1-14.**

Let me just take a moment to get all of the pieces on the table, because today is just a little bit complicated. You see, today we are beginning our annual giving campaign. It is a time that we set aside each year to reflect on what we have received and what we have to give. If we all do it right, then it is a time of gratitude when we all notice the great gifts that we have to give, beyond financial contributions. If we do it poorly, then it's a time when it looks like the church is just asking you for money. Don't get me wrong, we do need money. Almost our entire budget is funded through pledges given by us. And we draw up the budget on the basis of how much is pledged. So yes, please pledge, even if it's a very small amount of money. But we always hope that this time is more than just a very public budgeting process. Frankly, we hope that it is a time of spiritual growth for all of us. We hope that it is a time that calls us out of the mindset of commodities and into the mindset of gift. Where we remember the responsibilities, joys, and possibilities across our lives.

And so normally on this day I'd be hoping for a text that gives me a chance to talk about either how much we have been given or what it is that we are giving to. Or in other words, what God has given us and what God is doing in the world through us. I actually think that this gospel text can do it, but we'll need to talk about it a little bit, first. Jesus tells a number of these kinds of parables that have Episcopalians nodding along happily for quite some time until the final moment, when we're suddenly whiplashed awake by a turn we didn't expect.

We're all super comfortable with at least *the idea* of a party to which everyone is invited. That's the kind of God we want, whether our own parties or liturgies actually live up to that ideal or not. But things take a turn, and suddenly we've got this guy who doesn't meet the dress code. And the king doesn't just say, "perhaps the gentleman would be more comfortable in a jacket. We happen to have one here with the club crest." No, this is a maître d' with brass knuckles who has the disheveled guest bound hand and foot and cast not even to the curb but into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The first Christians in the earliest church, who were the original audience for this parable, would have heard it as an allegory for God's work in creating the church. It is almost a repeat of the parable we heard last week. The allegory works like this: Jesus is the bridegroom; the Father invites God's historically chosen people to come party with Jesus. They decline and in fact get a bit rough with folks like John the Baptist and the earliest Christians, who are the slaves sent out with the invitations. So when the intended guests refuse to party, God starts inviting Gentiles and sinners and all kinds of unlikely characters, who show up to the wedding feast and become the church. But the fact that the standards for getting an invitation have dropped does not mean that all standards have disappeared. There are still norms and those are sometimes violated even within the ad hoc citizenship of the kingdom of God. And when the fault is egregious—something like not wearing a wedding dress—it can even lead to expulsion.

So for the first audience, the parable tells how the message of Jesus first went to the Jewish people, but it wasn't received and so the message went to Gentiles. And while there was a robust response, it hasn't solved all the problems. It's a "how did we get here" parable: Gentiles in the church, and also imperfections in the church. So that's fine,

but we are not as occupied with the question of Gentiles in the church, as it has been the norm for two thousand years. So how can this parable speak to us today? And what does that have to do with stewardship?

The two main elements are the same: radical welcome and norms within community. And they cut to some deep issues, perhaps especially for the Episcopal Church. We have made “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” our calling card and put up signs three blocks from every church announcing this. And so the challenges of hospitality are persistent for us. Diversity and identity; welcome and standing for something; forgiveness and discipline. How do we say “you are welcome here no matter what” and avoid being just an extremely quirky social club with pay as you can dues?

A priest friend of mine was recently struggling with this and it helped me think through it in terms of St. Christopher’s. A member of the parish he serves was behaving vilely and he was struggling with the balance of our commitment to radical welcome and the need for the church to stand for a Christian way of life. And as we puzzled over this (I hope with compassion) we finally struck on something that felt faithful: all are welcome here just as we are, with no prerequisites or requirements for entry; but none of us are expected to stay the same here. The church is committed to radical welcome, but always with the goal of ongoing transformation. Jesus ate with sinners and traitors and children and all kinds of unseemly people; and he turned them into disciples.

I think that this is a faithful interpretation of this parable. Come to the feast, the table is set, and whoever you are, you are invited. The party won’t be complete without you. And also, part of the point of the feast is transformation. I know that we come here to church for comfort and fellowship and even fun. And all of those are good holy reasons. But all the time that we are getting those things God is at work transforming us into disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a transformation that never ends and does not have limits. As there is no threshold for entry into the church, so there is no limit to God’s transforming work—our transformation propels us out to transform the world.

This is what we’re really about here. I think that it’s what God is about among us here. And this is what our stewardship is about. It is about the ways that we are being transformed by God and the way that God is transforming the world through us. This is the process that we are giving from and the process that we are giving to. Yes by all means make a pledge, even if it seems like it’d be so small that it won’t affect the budget much. But even more than that: consider how God is changing us, how God is calling us to be change in the world. Take this stewardship season as a chance to ask what God is calling us together to do, who God is calling us together to be, and what unique thing you bring to the feast that was prepared from the foundation of the world. Amen.