

“THE PARTY WE GET”

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 2017

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

How can we celebrate today--with the world being the way it is?

How can we digest a feast of . . . thanksgiving? How come we go on telling ourselves that we are God's children and God loves us and all will be well, since we know the truth about how people continually disappoint God by neither loving God with our whole heart nor loving one another as ourselves? How festive can we feel, given what we have done with the world we have been given? What sort of a party begins with the confession of sins?

Today's parable is about: the party we get. (As opposed to the party we might put together ourselves.)

Jesus often discussed the issue of sitting together at meals, of waiting tables, of inviting people, etc. So it makes good sense that we would remember him, first of all, by eating together. “Do this in remembrance of me,” he said. And he meant it. As Paul says in Ephesians, “He made us sit together in the heavenly places,” meaning right here and right now. He makes us sit together. And where he is, is a “heavenly place.”

Discussing this parable will give me an opportunity to review with you the simple Reformation theological principle, that it is not we who (amazingly) work and work to make God happy; it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work according to God's good pleasure. We are justified, in short, not by our works but by our faith in God's work. And God's work is evident to us in three ways: the party belongs to God, who created the world; the inviting is done by the Son of God, otherwise we wouldn't have been invited; and

the party keeps rolling because the Holy Spirit keeps the wine flowing.

The party we would design would be an escape from reality.

We would like to have . . . friends over. People we like. People who will repay the favor. The part of our family we get along with. Agreeable people. People who will make it a fun time. You know how it goes. We would “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die,” to quote from one of Jesus' other parables. In other words, the party would be all about us. Who we like, what we like, what we want to do. (And then we would die.)

But this is the curious party we get instead, according to the parable: The invited guests refused to come, even when the host begged them. They insulted the host, saying they were too busy. So, the host looked for others to eat his banquet, and found us. He was being absolutely, totally indiscriminate in who he invited. “Invite everyone” he told his messengers. GOOD and BAD.

That is how we got here. That is the party we get. “This is the feast of victory for our God.”

If we have reason to celebrate in this world, it is not because we are grabbing whatever we can reach from the carousel as we spin around and around. It is because God has called us to be his own and live for him in his kingdom.

This parable was told in such a way that. if you listen to it as people who ARE at the party, you should hear this: you are not here because you deserve it. You are not here because you are one of God's

aristocrats. You are here because it is the king's good pleasure to serve lots of people enormous amounts of food and drink and hold a big dance that goes on for days. You are here because it makes the host happy to have you here. Whether you were a "good" person or a "bad" person, whether you belonged to the royal country club or not, whether you got good grades in school or were homecoming queen or had made a hash of your life, none of it matters. You are here for one reason and one reason only—to celebrate on the king's dime.

The party we would like to have would only include people who are doing all the right things to make the world a better place. People who disappoint God, people who live for themselves, people with bad reputations, disagreeable people . . . would simply not be invited.

But this party is not like that. In fact, if you make the mistake of looking around and thinking you are better than any of the other guests, forget it. Only the king invites, and only the king disinvites. Thou shalt not judge. Shut up and celebrate!

That is the party Jesus says we get—as it looks from inside. The "emic" or "insider" perspective, as sociologists might call it. That is this feast. Pure gift of God, simply given to those who are willing to come and enjoy it. Not on account of any merit in ourselves, but only because of the grace of God.

The world outside may not want to live for God, in which case the world would not respect the invitation. But let the world think what the world wants to think! You are not to judge them for not being here. You are not to judge anyone who is here. When the king threw party plan B, he threw party rules out the window and went with a single rule: unqualified grace to anyone and everyone, to be received by faith.

I hope you see how this parable proclaims salvation by grace alone through faith, "not by works, lest anyone should boast," as Paul says in Romans. See

how it fits the Reformation template in Philippians 2:14? "It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." We are saved by grace alone, through faith. Not by works, lest anyone should boast—as Paul put it.

Let me apply this to one little experience of my own.

Growing up poor and moving around a lot, I have always been sensitive to slights. I have always felt more outsider than insider.

When I was a missionary in Papua New Guinea back in the 1970's and 80's, I found out by accident that most of my colleagues used to get together once in a while to play poker and drink beer. Neither of which I enjoyed, and I guess they surmised as much, so they never invited me. Until I overheard them talking about it, about the time I was set to return home. So, they finally invited me. Once. And I went, not to play poker or drink beer, but to be included.

It was no big deal, really. Why should I have cared? But it did give me a little sample of what everyday life is for most of the world. And it reinforced my sense of how dramatically different we are from the God who created us. We plan our lives around people we prefer to be around; we distance ourselves from people we hold in contempt. Jesus told us to turn the other cheek, to forgive seventy times seven times, never to take revenge, and so on, but we don't. He even said:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

But we go right on playing favorites.

Thank God, God is different. God forgives us. Seventy times seven times. God turns the other cheek. God invites people who can never reciprocate. That's how we got in.

And God commands us also to forgive, to interrupt the hurting of the world.

Hannah Arendt wrote:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.

What the world deserves, Jesus was telling us, is the first part of this parable—with no sequel. But the party we get, by God's grace alone, which we receive by faith alone, is a party anyway. A celebration of God's goodness. God identifies us, identifies with us, invites us, and gives us joy—for no better reason than that he chooses to do so. This is the party we get.

P.S.: Jesus does add that if we are not at the party to celebrate, we belong somewhere else. (This is the story of the one expelled.) You and I are here to celebrate, and to be strengthened, through this eucharist, in faith towards God and in fervent love toward one another.

Amen.

