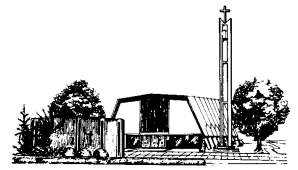


Campbell United Methodist Church

The Weekly Sermon



Practical Parables: *The Parable of the Wedding Feast* *The Good, the Bad, The Ugly and the Beautiful*

Rev. Alan Jones

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Matthew 22:1-14

I confess up front that one of my real weaknesses as a pastor is my inability to come up with catchy sermon titles. When I saw in the scripture that the invitation went out to “the good and the bad” – I knew that this could help me with a title. What I didn’t know was that when we contacted Mark Shepherd to provide us with a picture of an empty wedding banquet room, the picture he would provide would be a picture of the dining room at Clint Eastwood’s country club, making the connection with my sermon title complete!

At last they had found an appropriate wife-to-be for the young prince. So let’s have a wedding as soon as we can before anybody changes their mind. Get the invitations out! Find the best beef and lamb, the best wines. And the day before the invitation reminders go out...but guess what, nobody is coming! Nobody coming to a state banquet! Who would turn down an invitation for a state banquet with the king, especially on such a festive occasion? For goodness sake it’s is a wedding feast!

There is a lot that could be said about the background of this parable. Matthew places it here in chapter 22 during the story of Holy Week, right at the end of Jesus’ ministry. The rejection of the young prince probably has echoes of the story of the rejection of Jesus by his people. Remember that this gospel was written fifty years after the events of Holy Week, and ten or twenty years after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the armies of Rome. There are three versions of this story: this one in Matthew, the story in Luke and, probably the earliest version, is in the Gospel of Thomas, which isn’t part of our Bible. The story has multiple layers of meaning, and different details apply to different contexts. There is no way, in one sermon, that all the different dimensions could be explored. Is there also a universal application of this ancient story? Can it speak to those of us trying to make sense out of life at the close of the twentieth century?

So, allow me please, to offer a more internal, spiritualized interpretation of this story, which may not catch every detail, but I am sure that these themes are consistent with the intent of the parable as Jesus taught it.

The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king giving a wedding banquet... The Kingdom of Heaven is repeatedly described as a party, a celebration, a gathering of people who have something to shout about. The Kingdom of Heaven is not some kind of esoteric

teaching that should be kept quiet. At the core of the kingdom is celebration. At the core of your life and mine is celebration, a joyful response to the love and grace of God at work in our lives. And that celebration comes as result of an invitation by God to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven community.

Given our busy schedules, it's easy to miss the invitation. We are so used to controlling our own choices. We have been trained to become consumers, and we make all the decisions. It puts a lot of pressure on us, and brings a great deal of tension. We are called not only to respond to the invitation to celebrate, but also to initiate the celebrations. The ability to celebrate is a much neglected God-given gift. The invitation to true joy is the central invitation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A second theme in this parable is avoidance of the invitation. The reasons we give for not responding to the inner invitation to celebrate in God's kingdom may not be bad in themselves. In our story, one went to his farm, another to his business. There is no hint of that either engaged in some bad activities. Don't miss the point -- these are responsible, busy people in the everyday working world. They are simply so consumed with the "busyness" of their tightly prescribed schedules that nothing can break through -- even God can wait. So, in the end, the personal decision making issue here is one about priorities. How high on your list of priorities, and mine, does the kingdom of Heaven come? William Barclay says, responding to this text: *Some people are so busy making a living that they forget to make a life.*

The third theme is a simple reminder that the motivating factor for entering into the Kingdom of Heaven is the quest for joy in our life. Celebration is so much better than guilt or fear as a motivator! Those who didn't come to the feast were not punished, they just lost out on a great opportunity for celebration in their lives.

Perhaps the most powerful theme in this parable is the king's decision to move beyond invitations to the ruling elite, and instead to invite the ordinary people from off the streets. The text actually says *the good and the bad*. For the purposes of this sermon I have just added to the good and the bad, ugly and the beautiful. What is perhaps most surprising about the Kingdom of Heaven is that it is not populated only by the spiritual elite. The great feast is composed of many different kinds of people... from different backgrounds, different educational levels and spiritual levels. Part of the internal mechanism of understanding the Kingdom of Heaven is understanding how you and I come to terms with a wide variety of internal images of who we are... to oversimplify, do you know your good self, your bad self, your ugly self and your beautiful self? It is the voyage of inner exploration that gives us a much fuller understanding of people we meet in the outer world.

Of particular interest, of course, are those people we find most difficult to understand –the murderer, the terrorist, the abuser, the thief. The great shock, of course, when we meet these people in the outer world is that they are not the monsters we imagine. They are, for the most part, ordinary people just like you and me. So that then begs the question as to what would push any of us to act out in such antisocial ways.

The kingdom of Heaven invites us to deepen our lives, and to put ourselves firmly in the shoes of those in the world who are radically different from us. When we have explored difference we can build community... and the feast can become a true celebration of who we are.

There's one troubling part of the story I haven't talked about yet. Remember?

The King arrives at the banquet, greets his guests, and notices one of them not wearing a wedding garment. When asked why, he was speechless; so the host has him forcefully evicted and thrown into the outer darkness.

We are not told any details. Some commentators believe that special wedding garments may have been provided at the door, rather like the *ashobe* clothes we wear for African Epiphany. This may mean that the man deliberately chose not to enter into the spirit of the party... even so, the punishment seems cruel and unusual for the crime.

So please make sure today that you're ready to respond to the invitation. It is God's invitation, but it is also your own inner invitation to the great banquet of life. Be ready to make some new internal friends... some people you don't particularly like or understand, and amazingly they'll become friends.

And remember that the Kingdom banquet is a feast characterized by great joy and celebration. You're going to have a great time. It will be a blast, so accept the invitation, sit back and enjoy the ride!