

October 15, 2017
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“You are Cordially Invited”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 32:1-14 ~ Matthew 22:1-44

Several years ago, I was invited to Cleveland for a conference at Church House ... the UCC mother ship. I was privileged to have been asked to attend, and I learned a lot about the polity of our denomination. John Thomas, then the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ addressed us ... and I learned a lot from him. We had three full days of meetings with some very dynamic speakers ... and I learned a lot about our past and even more about the exciting direction our church is going. And I learned a lot about myself ... mostly at the airport.

One thing I learned is that I may not be cut out for air travel. Before my flight even boarded I made a quick stop at the ladies' room ... which I learned is now called the family room. The most important thing I learned there was never to put my purse in the sink because that activated the automatic faucet ... flooding its entire contents.

From there I headed to security and fished out my soggy boarding pass and driver's license. I felt like I should explain to the agent why they were wet, but she didn't even bat an eye. In fact, I began to feel a little better about myself as I prepared to go through the screening process ... because the young man in front of me was defending his right to carry Chef Boyardee ravioli in his carry-on bag because he had emptied it into a clear zip lock bag. I might add he was wearing flannel pajamas and flip flops.

I was reared in a time when people dressed up for air travel and we certainly dressed up for church. It was supposed to signify reverence, but if truth be told, I think a lot of it had to do with showing off. At least it did in my case. I liked wearing my best clothes and my new shoes. I sort of miss those days, but I don't think the majority of you are interested in having a dress code, and I must say that I agree.

But Jesus' parable today suggests the church does have a dress code so to speak, and that there are limits to who gets to stay at the party. It's a strange parable, isn't it? Actually, it seems to be a combination of two other biblical stories: the grace story of the banquet in Luke 14 where the invited guests refuse the invitation so the door is thrown wide open to the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame ... and the judgment story of the vineyard in last week's reading in Matthew where the tenants treat the owner's servants ... and then his son ... with violence ... and reap violence upon themselves as a harvest.

Matthew's combination is more of an allegory than a parable, because the story has an army burning down a city while dinner is getting cold ... and an errant guest who *isn't* thrown back into the street, but straight into hell. This is a story with enough hairpin turns to give us whiplash.

We begin with a King holding a wedding feast for his son, a beautiful image of God's grace. The dominion of God is imaged in various ways in the Bible. It's a shade tree that grows from a tiny seed. It's a Temple that's built up block by block. It's a family who all live in one big house. It's a journey of the Spirit ... an adventure in discovering life. But of all these images my favorite is this ... the dominion of God is a party. It's a wedding feast. That's what God's place is like...a giant party! Isn't that fabulous? We should have that out on the marquis all the time: "We're having a party ... all are welcome!"

Well, back to the story. The people first invited refuse to come. In those days invitations were made and accepted weeks before a banquet. On the day of the feast, servants were sent out to escort those who had accepted. In this story those people now refuse to come and then even mistreat the servants sent to retrieve them. Bad form! Bad manners! So, the king sends his troops to destroy them all and burn down their city. Whoa ... talk about overkill!

It's sure not what we would expect, but Matthew is interpreting Jesus' story for his day in the way he tells it. Everybody knew what Israel had done to the prophets ... those messengers from God sent one after another to invite them to life ... one after another abused and killed. By the time Matthew's gospel was written, the Roman army had marched through the land and left Jerusalem a smoking ruin. So, Matthew's church had witnessed this violence firsthand. Why would God let this happen to the chosen people? Well, Matthew says, because they deserved it. They had their chance. They refused God's invitation. But now the King has invited all of us ... Jews and Gentiles, "good and bad" in Matthew's church ... to be the new "chosen" people of God. A sad story, but that's the way it happened as Matthew saw it. God has a new people now, Matthew tells his church, so let the party begin.

But wait, wait, wait...not so fast. Matthew also adds this curious twist about the wedding guest who flunks the dress code. The guests are all here, the steam is rising from the table ... the band is playing ... the King parades in. But there's this one guy standing in the middle of the crowd with a checkered coat and a polka dot tie. Oblivious! Clueless! "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" asks the King. "Huh?" "Bind him hand and foot," the King commands, "and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!" I hate gnashing of teeth! This is one tough King!

There's a dress code for God's party? Who knew? It's not the suit and tie ... or hat and gloves that we used to wear. It's not a robe and stole or some other official uniform of the day. We can't be so literal when we read the Bible or we'll miss the point entirely.

In the early days of the church, when people professed their faith and became a Christian, it was a big deal. It was a serious commitment because it changed everything. It meant a new way of living ... a new set of friends ... a new place in the world. It meant leaving your old way of life ... your old habits and practices. For some it meant finding a new job ... even a new place to live. For many it meant being rejected by their old community ... even their own family ... for God's sake. But it was worth it. It was wonderful! They gained a new community ... a new family ... a new hope ... a whole new life. It was like being born again.

So, when people were baptized ... to symbolize this radical change ... this new creation ... they would take off their clothes and enter the water naked ... with nothing in their possession and nothing on ... just as they were born. As they came out of the water, they were given a new

white robe ... like a baby wrapped in a new blanket. Putting on this new robe symbolized the new way of life which they had embraced. As Paul puts it in Colossians:

”As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:12-15)

“As God’s chosen ones, Paul says.” For Matthew, it’s all about being the “chosen” people of God. He ends Jesus’ story with this enigmatic motto: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt22:14). I think that means everybody is invited, but few end up belonging ... staying with the people of God because they don’t really want to follow the dress code and claim all that the identity means.

For Matthew, Jesus’ story is historical. The original “chosen” people chose not to obey God or live by his call or respond to his invitation to celebrate life. They chose the human ways of death instead. They ignored God ... and insulted God ... and rejected God ... and abused God’s servants in the name of God. So, God rejected them and chose a new group of people, the church. And God included everybody in the invitation to be the new people of God. But for Matthew, the story is also cautionary. Matthew is saying to the church, don’t be smug. Don’t be self-righteous. Don’t thumb your nose at the people who rejected God’s first invitation and got too caught up in the ways of the world. Now that you are the chosen, you have to act like it ... you have to respond to God’s invitation ... you have to choose the ways of life to which God has invited you. Otherwise, God might give up on you, too.

Grace is free, but it’s not cheap. We shouldn’t take it lightly. We shouldn’t take God for granted. God is no more interested in our lame excuses for not doing the right things than God was in theirs. And grace does not mean that anything goes ... that we can throw away all the rules. We do not live by “if it feels good, do it.” We do not believe in “me first; mine, mine, mine.” We do not follow the laws of “everyone for him - or her self ... the survival of the fittest.” Those are the ways of the world. Remember what Jesus says about God’s ways in Matthew?

”Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:17-20).

As God’s people, we do have a dress code. Writes Don Miller:

The tough thing about Christian spirituality is that you have to mean things. You can’t just go through the motions or act religious for the wrong reasons.... After all, if we are just going through the religious motions to get people to think of us as religious, praise us, and all that, we are receiving our false redemption from a bunch of people who are going to be dead in fifty years. This is a shabby replacement for an eternal God.

It’s much harder to take God’s invitation seriously ourselves ... and live as Christians in the world ... to be the church in the way we order our lives ... to pursue our goals and arrange our

relationships ... to live out Christ's love by including the people we want to exclude from our circle of care. That really takes something.

So, there it is. Jesus' story is an invitation dropped in our laps by his messenger Matthew. "You are cordially invited to a party at the house of the Lord." It's up to each and every one of us to "R.S.V.P."

May we pray?

O God, we don't deserve to be here, but you have invited us from the highways and byways to be your people. Fill us with your Spirit, clothe us with your love so that every person we encounter, all the people with whom we work and play and live might know you love them and want to join the party, too. Amen