

Sermon: RSVP to God

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian
Sunday, October 15th, 2017
10:00am Worship
Lyons First Presbyterian Church
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

Philippians 4:1-9
Psalm 106: 1-5, 48a
Matthew 22:1-14

Invitation and Response

Hey everyone, there is a super-big party coming up, and you're all invited. But first, who wants to host it? There will be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of guests—*any takers?* ...

Whenever there's a big party or event, there's going to be plenty of work on the part of the host, with benefit intended for all those invited... whether a seasonal feast, like at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, or Independence Day, or a life event, like a baby shower, a graduation, wedding, or a retirement, or a landmark get-together, like a class reunion.

In some cases, the invite list is straightforward, such as in the case of a class reunion, where the invite list is basically the list of students who graduated in a certain year. But in many cases, the invite list is a trickier thing—even for a family holiday. For instance in that timeless classic, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, perhaps Clark Griswold's wife, Ellen, would have much preferred to leave Cousin Eddie off the list. Ellen knew that with Cousin Eddie came a certainty that the big family Christmas being hosted in her home had about a zero percent chance of going according to plan.

But even when Cousin Eddie is on the invite list, there is yet something that can yet assist the host in preparing for the event—and that is knowing whether Cousin Eddie is actually coming to Christmas, or not. We usually think of this in terms of the RSVP process to an event, in which a sent invitation requests that the recipient respond as to whether he or she will be in

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, October 15, 2017, the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/10/15/>

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attendance. But of course that process only works if people do respond, and further if they follow through with what they have indicated. In the parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22, the king is hosting something big, and faces a dilemma when it comes to the list of invitees, and the responses received.

King, Son, and Wedding

Jesus lets us know up front that the parable he is about to tell is a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven. So, as we encounter the gospel in Matthew 22:1-14, that is what we must look for. In the second verse, Christ says that “*the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.*” Since we are looking to comprehend the metaphor, it is important here that we think about this statement. Who is the king? Who is the son? Who else is in the wedding? If we understand the kingdom of heaven to be the empire of our God, then we can readily choose our interpretation. The king throwing the banquet is God. The son then, is Jesus. And if it’s a wedding, with Jesus making vows, then the Church is there too. For in Scripture, “marriage symbolizes the covenant relationship between God and the people.”² In Jesus’ earthly ministry, people did not yet consider themselves Christian, so the immediate metaphor for those hearing him tell this parable in person would have been a marriage of God’s son and the Jewish people, or Israel. For our time though, we can find the Church standing beside Jesus.

The rest of the parable deals with the wedding guests—who comes, and who does not. And the last verse, which is the trickiest to interpret is what the story moves toward. In verse 14 Jesus concludes that “*many are called, but few are chosen.*” It is helpful to hold that verse in front of us as we receive the rest of the parable—“*many are called, but few are chosen.*” What is God saying to those in Jesus’ immediate presence nearly two thousand years ago with these

² The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, p. 1786

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words, and what is God saying to us now? *“Many are called, but few are chosen.”* We could get into some deep theology here, particularly on the point of double predestination. In just a few weeks will be the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, so that might even be appropriate. But alas, John Calvin’s work *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is pretty thick and contemplating his theology of double predestination in-depth would likely be biting off a bit more than we should at the moment. Book Club, anyone?

The A-List

“Many are called, but few are chosen.” What is Jesus’ parable leading us to? Let’s allow ourselves to receive the gospel in the rest of the parable through a lens of invitation and response, or the RSVP process. So the king—God—is hosting a wedding banquet. Invitations have been sent out. In Matthew 22:3, God is anticipating a response: *“He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.”* All the A-list people RSVP’d “no thanks” to the wedding invitation. The leading people for God, the most religious Jews, were not coming to see Jesus be married. But the king proceeds to re-invite the A-listers. God *really* wants a “yes” response from those invited. In verse 4, *“Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’”* Or in a present day paraphrase maybe it’s something like this: Listen... there’s an open bar, an all-you-can-eat buffet, and an after party across the street that you’ll be talking about for years. Just say yes; you won’t regret it. I really want you to be able to share in the feast. But a second time, the RSVP comes back as a “no,” and more violently.

What is the king to do? This wedding is a big deal, and shockingly, the very people who might have been closest to the king’s son weren’t coming. Not to mention that in places where there are kings or queens ruling the land, it is probably very unusual for anyone to flat-out refuse

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a royal summons. So invites are sent out to those on the B-list, C-list, and beyond. The king tells his servants to “*Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find*” and in result, “*the wedding hall was filled with guests.*” Recall that last verse the parable is getting closer and closer to: “*Many are called, but few are chosen.*” By verse 10 with the full wedding hall, we can certainly see that many have certainly been invited, or called: the A-list Jews, and then anybody else in sight. Verses 11-13 deal with the other part, addressing the few who are chosen.

What God Requires, God Provides

Matthew 22:11-12 reads, “when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless.” Now, if the A-list Jewish elite who did not attend had shown up wearing less than the best, we might quickly understand the king’s outrage. But what about the guests who did come, invited off the street? It is *reasonable* to assume that a poor person even has garments appropriate for a royal occasion? The improperly clothed guest in the parable is identified as failing to properly honor the king and the circumstance, similar to those who RSVP’d “no”. Why?

Elsewhere in Scripture that are examples suggesting that in ancient times, a custom existed in which garments were provided to guests. In Genesis 45:22 while administering the instructions of Pharaoh regarding the arrival of Joseph’s brothers, Joseph provides them with garments. When the brothers later returned to Pharaoh’s presence, it is not too far a jump to guess those garments would have been worn. How often do we intentionally wear something given to us when in the presence of the person who gave us the item? We do that too, don’t we?

This gives us something to think about in the parable. If the king is God, and God provides everything God’s people require—which is something we believe—then we can grab

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onto the idea that for the guests invited to the wedding banquet, the host would have had a system in place to ensure that the guests lacked nothing. Yet, one showed up not wearing the wedding robe provided to him. And the king judged the unfaithful guest, giving the following instruction for his disposal: “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Responding in Faith, Clothed as Christians

Remember that God has called each one of you, and really, really desires a faithful response. God wants the response so much, because it is good for you. There is a feast ready and waiting on the other side of the invitation. And remember that a sincere “yes” should come along with the donning of appropriate garments, which God has already provided us. Recall the popular Scripture selection for wedding services, Colossians 3:12—“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (NIV).” Can we agree that those are the sort of royal, holy, heavenly garments each one of us has hanging in our wardrobe, ready for wear?

Part of the reality for us as disciples of Christ is living with the knowledge that what is right is not always easy. In fact, it frequently is not. Garments of kindness and patience may not come off the hanger as often as they should. But we are encouraged to imitate our predecessors in the faith like Paul, and to keep struggling beside others in the work of the gospel.³ Putting on the garments worthy of attendance at Christ’s wedding banquet is an effort we should always make; it witnesses the gospel in our lives and communities. Paul encouraged the congregation in Philippi by writing the following words, which speak just as truly to this congregation in Lyons: “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9).

³ Phil. 4:3

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God invites us to so much, all the time. How we clothe ourselves as Christians matters, because our attitudes, emotions, and actions are a visible representation of our faith. We are to aim to clothe ourselves in the attributes of Love, in the glory which God has given us for the purposes of imaging God, here on earth.

God wants our response, every day. As ones who *are* called, let us RSVP to God with regularity, in prayer, in thought, in words, and in the things that we do. God's love and the grace of Jesus Christ is an open invite to all. Our Christian response is living out this love reflexively, a heartfelt "yes" clothed in the glory of God, honoring those special gifts given to each one.

King of the wedding banquet, we hope and pray that each one of us will remain among the few—the chosen—sharing in the perfect union of your Son and your people, in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.