

“What Comes First?”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Matthew 22:1-14

This is a parable about priorities, our priorities and God’s priorities. Take, for instance, those fine folks who received the first flight of wedding invitations. What were they thinking? After all, this was no ordinary wedding, not that any wedding is ever ordinary, but this was the wedding of a prince, the son of the King.

Just imagine if some famous celebrity, like your favorite actor or musician or athlete, invited you to attend their wedding, or the wedding of one of their beloved children. Wouldn’t you move heaven and earth to make it? Maybe buy a new tux or dress? Even consider skipping Thanksgiving or Christmas with your family to be there? And whatever trouble it took to get ready would be more than worth it. We’re talking about a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here. But the people in Jesus’ parable weren’t interested.

Not only did they decline to go, but they offered up the lamest excuses. “Things have really been hopping down at work, so I’m going to pass on the wedding and attend to my business,” one said. Another replied, “Maybe next time, but right now I was on my way to mow the lawn and trim the bushes.” “Love to,” answered a third, “but after eighteen holes, I’m heading home to watch the game.”

Of course, we sympathize. Life is busy, and we constantly make choices about where we will be and when and why. It’s all too easy to arrange the various facets of life in the wrong order, putting things of lesser importance at the very top and shoving the stuff that really matters down at the bottom of the heap. In fact, perhaps the greatest day-to-day struggle we face is how

to apportion our limited resources, especially our time, to the seemingly limitless demands that just keep flooding in.

Every day, we make choices with the freedom God has given us. Sometimes we make the mark, and sometimes, we miss, which is only natural because none of us are perfect. Life moves on, at a rate that seems to accelerate with each passing year, and we get older and hopefully wiser, until someday we run out of choices. And right then, and at several pausing points along the way, we get a chance to consider how we've done.

At those choice moments, the regret and remorse we feel for our poorer choices is somewhat like having our city burnt or getting slaughtered by the servants of the King. If we survey our lives and see how we usually put work ahead of family, if we look back and see that money and power often took first place on our priority list, if we've chased after the transient things of this world and forgot or neglected the things eternal, God have mercy upon us.

And the good news is that God does. We heard at the beginning that this is a parable about priorities, both ours and God's. And though we may suffer from our own skewed priorities, we have much to celebrate, because we are God's top priority. Think about that for a minute. You and me and everyone we know are God's top priority. What a wondrous thing.

In the parable, the King sends out servants to issue a personal invitation not once but twice. And that same personal invitation keeps coming, countless time. Some churches extend it through a weekly altar call, where people come forward to confess publicly their faith and be saved. The Episcopal is one of those churches. Every Sunday, we invite everyone present to move forward in their faith and find salvation in the body and blood of Jesus. Under normal circumstances, people even walk down the aisle to the altar rail to receive it.

And everyone is invited, just like in the parable. The servants of God are sent out into the streets and alleys, instructed to call all they meet into the banqueting hall. It's not just in this time and place that the invitation gets given, but every day the message arrives, encouraging us to choose God, to choose abundant life and order our lives on the Risen Christ once crucified.

This is the priority of God: that we live abundant lives. Lives of peace undisturbed by hatred and anxious grasping. Lives of hope filled with eager anticipation. Lives of love that conquer death. A life where joy tempers fear, and passion pushes away numbness. These are the good things God wants for us, and all we need to do is accept the invitation, to choose God first, above all else.

It seems like that would be easy, considering what God brings to the table. But we all know the etiquette around weddings. If you receive and accept an invitation, there are certain customs and expectations. Just ask the guy in the parable who didn't wear his wedding robe. That was considered disrespectful, a sign of ingratitude, that he wasn't taking this special event seriously. Nowadays, if you receive an invite, you probably ought to send a gift, and if you go, you definitely need one. With God, it's no different, and that may cause us pause.

It's not that God gives us life in order to get something back from us. The grace of God is freely given. But if we're truly grateful for the invitation and the celebration, it seems natural to offer something as a token of that gratitude. Otherwise, we're just users whose ingratitude blocks the grace of God from getting through to us. So it's not really for God's sake that we need to give something back. It's for our sake, for the sake of our sanity and our sanctity. As creatures created in the image of a giving God, we have a human and holy need to give.

But what can you give the God who literally has everything? Money? Maybe. If you've got it, give it, and notice I didn't say, if you've got enough. None of us will ever have enough of

the green stuff. What are your priorities? Or how about time? If anything, that's in even shorter supply. A person can usually find a way to make more money, if they're prepared to make sacrifices, but no one can make time. Only God can create time. It is one of his most precious and fragile gifts to us. Are we too stingy to share a portion back? What can we give?

Certainly, there's nothing we can offer that will repay in the slightest way the great blessings God so richly bestows, and there's nothing we can do to express the true depth of our gratitude. We are caught in the quandary of the Christmas carol composer, who wrote, "What gift can I offer, poor as I am. If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what I have I give him, give him my heart."

Give God your heart, not a piece of it, but all that you can, and everything else, especially your priorities, will follow. Amen.