

“Love in Generosity (The Invitation)”

Matthew 22:1-14

Pentecost 19A

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

October 11, 2020

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Love in Generosity (The Invitation)”

Matthew 22:1-14

Pentecost 19A

Formal invitations seem to be a thing of the past, unless it is a big deal. State Dinners. Black Tie Awards. The Vanity Fair Party after the Oscars. Formal Wedding Invitations (the kind with the little pieces of tissue paper in between the printed cards) seem to be again out of style, in favor of simpler, more casual options.

Events like a great dinner or a wedding feast in 1st century Palestine came with quite the organizational arrangement. People would have known well the custom of such a wedding feast; invitations sent out long before the date, people replying in the affirmative.

The king we encounter in our story this morning goes all out for his son's wedding banquet. I bet he arranged for asparagus wrapped in prosciutto, maybe crab stuffed mushrooms, or those delicious bacon wrapped scallops. The best wine, and lots of it. The best band this side of the Jordan warming up and ready to go. The butter cream frosting on the wedding cake melting in the sun. You would be crazy to miss this event.

On the day of the wedding all was ready, the servants summoned the guests for dinner. Except, they didn't show up. The guests must have been so busy, forgetting the kids' soccer game or their weekend getaway to the big city in place of the wedding.

The King sent out yet more servants to invite ordinary citizens to the banquet. This time, the original invitees either ignore the royal summons altogether, or worse, they mistreat and kill some of the servants. A rather absurd reaction to a wedding invitation, but not the greatest absurdity of this dark tale. In retaliation, the king sends troops to destroy the offenders and then issues his invitation to all. A festive turn of events. The good and the bad- All welcome to the party hosted by the King. All welcome to the wedding banquet.

Nothing about this parable is appealing, right? This is an ugly parable. This is the third in a series of not-so-comfortable stories in the gospel of Matthew. In general Matthew is well, a little abrupt. Matthew bombards us with harsh parables that don't go down easily like a good wine with dinner. They are powerful and they are challenging.

There are only two ways you wind up on the outside of this party: **ONE**, you disregard the invitation completely, or **TWO**, you imagine an invitation this open to everyone cannot be worth very much, so you stumble in to the wedding still dressed like you just finished at the gym...in case the party is a bore.¹

This was the party of the century. One man came in at the gracious invitation of the King and came without the right "wedding robe" and was reprimanded and banished into the outer darkness. This was a gracious invitation; but it was far from a casual invitation. "What God requires of us is to do God's will. God wants everybody at the party, but not everybody wants to come or knows how to behave when they get there."²

This story in Matthew is not at all realistic in terms of our society. It's a claim that only the Gospel can make. This is a story about what

matters to God. It is about how we welcome others and how we treat them in our midst.

Because our God is a God of expansive love and radical inclusivity, we are left to hear, even in this parable, the good news that God invites ALL, the good and the bad. We are the ones who see, just how far God will go to make this invitation of grace. God doesn't stop with one invitation, but over and over again, God extends the invitation to us that we join the party and come to the table where all are welcome.

What we also learn is that God's words of love and forgiveness are more powerful than any words of punishment, hate or fear.³

God's invitation in the story is broadly inclusive and utterly decisive. This kind of invitation, the one about radical hospitality, the one about spreading the table wide to welcome everyone to it---that INVITATION---well, it changes your schedule... This invitation from God for us to be part of the banquet God has prepared---with people of such different traditions, looks and values---that invitation--changes your life.

This banquet is about God's grace overflowing for the whole community. It's a metaphor for God's love and care.

Because of God's invitation to that table, we can live in a way that opens us to share that same love and grace with others. To give up oneself for God's future Kingdom story, is where we find Jesus.

If you read on in the gospel of Matthew you hear how Jesus is under extreme pressure from the religious leaders, who are trying to trap him. Jesus is at a critical moment in his ministry, where he is trying to get God's message to any and all who would hear that the

opportunity to be hospitable and generous is here. Jesus' path from here on, goes through Jerusalem, to the cross. Soon it will be Jesus banished from the presence of others into outer darkness. Ridiculed. Rejected. Crucified.

It's like Jesus is suggesting that we should show up, we should accept an invitation and put some effort into it when we do.

I want to share with you a true story about that kind of intentionality.

There was an unusual high school football game played in Grapevine, Texas on November 7th, 2008. The game was between Grapevine Faith Academy and the Gainesville State School. Faith is a private Christian School and Gainesville State is a juvenile correctional facility.

That year, the Gainesville State Team had 14 players. They played every game on the road. Their record was 0-8. They had only scored twice. They wore outdated, used shoulder pads and helmets. The Gainesville State players were teenagers who had been convicted of crimes ranging from drugs to assault to robbery. Most had families who had disowned them.

On the other hand, at the time of the game, Faith Academy had a record of 7-2. They had 70 players, 11 coaches and the latest and best equipment.

Chris Hogan, the head coach at Faith Academy, knew the Gainesville team would have no fans and it would be no contest. So he thought, "What if half of our fans and half of our cheerleaders, for one night only, cheered for the other team?" He sent out an email to team supporters asking them to do just that. "Here's the message I want

you to send,” Hogan wrote. “You’re just as valuable as any other person on the planet.”

Some folks were confused by this request. One player said, “Coach, why are we doing this?” Hogan said, “Imagine you don’t have a home life, no one to love you, no one pulling for you. Imagine that everyone pretty much had given up on you. Now, imagine what it would feel like and mean to you for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you.”

On the night of the game, the Gainesville State players took the field and there was a banner the cheerleaders had made for them to crash through. The visitor’s stands were full. The cheerleaders were leading cheers for them. The fans were calling them by name. Isaiah, the quarterback/middle linebacker said, “I never in my life thought I would hear parents cheering to tackle and hit their own kid! Most of the time, when we come out, people are afraid of us. You can see it in their eyes, but these people are yelling for us. They knew our names.”

Faith Academy easily won and after the game the two teams gathered at the 50 yard line to pray. That’s when Isaiah, the quarterback, surprised everybody and asked if he could pray. He prayed, “Lord, I don’t know what just happened so I don’t know how or who to say thank you to, but I never knew there were so many people in the world who cared about us.”

On the way back to the bus, under guard, each one of the players was handed a burger, fries, a coke, candy, a Bible and an encouraging letter from one of the Faith Academy players.

Before the bus left, the Gainesville coach found Coach Hogan and said, “you’ll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You’ll never, ever know.”⁴

What Faith Academy did-it took planning and work and intentionality and courage. Who knows what got started that night, with the invitation to be part of something different, part of God’s radical hospitality.

The story of that game and the story of the banquet have me wondering about God’s story for us. How do we respond faithfully to God and God’s invitation on our lives? What are we called to do as a church to reach out to those who have felt excluded from God’s love? How do we respond to the challenges of welcoming all people into the life of this congregation? Where do we fall short on our care and concern for others?

Which brings me to the way we respond with our thankfulness to God’s generous invitation. As the king opened the table wide for guests, so too does God spread the table for us. These stories show us what really matters to God.

God wants all of us around that table. Keep in mind that God is generous to us – generous beyond our imagining – generous in granting us life and then showering us with love and grace and forgiveness and salvation and meaning and purpose. God is so generous but God is also so greedy, in a good way. God wants all of us. There is no corner of our lives that God doesn’t want to be a part of. That is good news because then we get God’s comfort, wisdom and guidance in every part of our lives.

But God's presence comes with some strings attached. We are responsible to God for how we live every aspect of our lives. To me that is what stewardship is all about - it's not just about the 10% of our income that we may or may not give away - it is about the 100%, the totality of our lives and whether we live that life in obedience to God.

We are in the beginning of our annual giving campaign, and I'm going to take a few minutes to talk about your intentional covenant and commitment to the First Church. It has been a practice of the Christian church since its very beginning that members of the faith community share some of their resources to support the church and its mission. Every church member and friend is asked to contribute their gifts. This morning, I invite each and every one of you to make a intentional commitment to sustain and grown the mission and ministry of the First Church with your gifts of time and energy and money.

As to what that commitment is, that's up to you and God. God knows what you are up against. God knows how busy you are. God knows about the downturn in the economy and the global pandemic we face. God knows that some of you are out of work or underemployed or fearful of losing your job. God knows that you have kids who need clothes and braces and books. God knows how much college costs these days. God knows that some of you are on fixed incomes. God knows that there are other organizations out there that have captured your heart and that you need to give time and money to them. God also knows if you are in a position to give more than you did before or to give for the very first time. God knows all of that stuff. The only one you need to please with this pledging decision is God.

This “God knowing everything” - it can be a mixed bag. Keep in mind, God knows other things as well. God knows how much stuff we have, how much money we make, how much we spend on ourselves and how much we give away. God knows how much money you spent last year going out to eat. God knows the total of my yearly satellite television bill. Again, the only one you need to please with this decision is God.

When it comes to your pledge commitment, God wants you to make a prayerful, thoughtful, faith-led decision that reflects the fullness of your life. And then God wants you to apply that attitude to every economic decision you make.

Also, don't be fooled. When you figure out what you are going to pledge for the coming year, you are not done wrestling with this issue of money and faith. We are never done wrestling with this issue of money and faith. That's the way God wants it. Because God is not content with 10% of our lives. God wants all of. And, with what do we return our thanks to this God is generous and greedy? What do we owe this God who invites all to the banquet? Everything. Absolutely everything. Amen.

¹ Sally A. Brown, Feasting on the Word, Matthew Vol.2 2014.

² Rev. Dr. Tom A. Long, Awaken Magazine, 2014.

³ DavidLose.net/2014

⁴ Rick Reilly's ESPN column, 2/17/2014. To learn more about the movement started by the football game see: <http://www.oneheart.com>