

Sunday, October 3, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Everyday People

INTRODUCTION

This past month we have been talking a lot about the vast expansiveness of God. In all four Gospel accounts, we read how Jesus keeps widening the circle of who is in and who is out. He teaches us how the “containers” of religion and religious practices are good and important but all too often can descend into an exclusive, ritualistic, legalistic, self-imposed prison. We have all seen how religion can be twisted into a weapon, targeted against the very same people God is inviting in to the Great Feast. In other words, we can really mess things up if we substitute religious practice for true devotion and servanthood. Someone once said that “religion is the last hiding place from God.” I find a chilling and solemn truth in that statement.

In today’s Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 through 14 we read a magnificent parable that Jesus told. What motives this parable is that the chief priests and the elders of the people were challenging his teachings and questioning him about his authority to say such radical things about God’s inclusivity. The fragile container of their religion was being rattled.

Hear Jesus’ response from the Gospel of Matthew 22:1-14.

SCRIPTURE - Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again, he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized [the king’s] servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

The Word of God for the people of God...

Sermon

Please pray with me...

Lord of the dance, God of all joy and mercy, be with us this day as we seek your voice and wisdom. Help us to receive your invitation to enter into the great feast! May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN.

Have you ever noticed how often the kingdom of heaven is compared to joy filled parties, wedding banquets and great feasts? Jesus begins his ministry of miracles at a wedding feast when he turns water into wine. The last supper, what we call communion, is really a reinterpretation of the Passover feast. And, you remember that parable when the woman finds her lost coins and throws a party to rejoice with her friends, or when the shepherd finds that one lost sheep and comes home screaming, "rejoice with me!" Or think about the story about that other famous parable of the prodigal son, when a rebellious and reckless young man returns home broken and humiliated. What does his father do? He throws a huge party! And of course, here in today's scripture we enter into another wedding feast parable to describe the unbridled joy found in the great feast that is the kingdom of heaven.

Imagine if this king was planning the party today, he might have started with a doodle poll to check availabilities of all his family and friends, then gathered up the results and sent out a "save the date" email, followed by the evite. Receiving no response, no RSVPs, he may have then "snail-mailed" personally engraved invitations in fancy envelopes, or even sent personal messengers to hand deliver the request. Pretty classy stuff.

As the story goes, he did apparently receive some regrets, "I'd love to come but, you know, the farm life is a cruel mistress. Those cows won't milk themselves." Another wrote, "Sorry big guy, our I.P.O. drops Monday. No can do. Catch you in Cabo!" Some of the invitees were so stressed out that they even killed the messenger! (There is never a time when this is a good strategy.)

Simply put, these priority-one invitees of the king, these very important people had adopted lifestyles and values that would not allow them to understand the importance of the invitation. They either had other priorities or simply tried to ignore the continual attempts to come to the great feast.

Naturally the king was angry. This was no ordinary feast. This was THE feast of feasts. The 5-star caterer was madly arranging the extravagant gift bags, the celebrity chef was barking orders in the busy kitchen, the 24-piece band was finishing up the sound check, exotic flowers were being carefully placed perfectly pressed linens. "Everything was ready! Come to the feast!" Yet, still no one accepted this invitation to enjoy this remarkable celebration of joy, oneness, union and reunion.

Can you believe it?

If the king was planning this feast today, he may very well have resorted to social media. He'd probably begin posting an open invitation on Facebook. His son, the groom, who is undoubtedly a powerful influencer, would slide the invite to his 1.5 million followers on Instagram. Within an hour, the buzz would undoubtedly gather strong traction on Reddit. People would flood in from everywhere. The server might even crash! All kinds of people would come, rich and poor, good and bad, young and old, sinner and saint. The doors would be wide open to this feast. Like that weekend at Woodstock, "This is a free concert from now on."

This parable reminds me of a music video I made back in the late eighties. The catchy pop song lyrics humanized homeless people and celebrated their dignity and worthiness. (How could I resist?) For the final scene, we arranged to hold a massive block party on a gentrified, brownstone lined street in the south end of Boston. The band would play the song on a flatbed trailer in front of all the neighbors. We also commissioned a colorfully dressed professional dance troupe, and invited sidewalk performers from all around town. A professional film crew of about 100 volunteered their time and equipment. The most honored guests however were the busloads of homeless people and families we brought in from all the greater Boston shelters. There was free food, cold drinks, ice cream trucks, balloons, live music, you name it, we had it all. What was totally amazing about that day was that with all this commotion, noise and inconvenience, not one complaint came in to us or the Boston Police. Rich and poor, good and bad, young and old, sinner and saint, we all celebrated our common kinship. On one short summer day, I witnessed the kingdom of heaven on earth. I'll never forget this one red-faced, middle-aged woman who was beaming with delight. As she boarded the bus back to the shelter, she turned to me and asked, "Can we do this again soon?" How I wanted to say, "Yes! let's do it again next Saturday!"



Once again, Jesus gives us a parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like. Once again, Jesus is inviting everyday people to join this great feast. There is no theological bar to hurdle, no RSVP to make, no righteousness test to pass, no confession of faith that will be coherent enough to gain entrance. "Come as you are," Jesus says, "We'll work with that. Take eat, drink, rejoice, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

There is an organization that I am quite fond of called [*Playing for Change*](#). These people reimagine a world, connected as one, through music. Like Jesus, these folks strive break down boundaries and overcome distances between people, but they do it not with parables but through music. For years now, *Playing for Change* has recorded and filmed hundreds of musicians from around the world performing in their natural environments. The music demonstrates how we are all one.

So let us join with them now and celebrate God's invitation to join in this extravagant feast. Everything is ready. Come to this table that is set for *Everyday People*.

EVERYDAY PEOPLE
written by Sly Stone

Sometimes I'm right and I can be wrong
My own beliefs are in my song
The butcher, the banker, the drummer and then
Makes no difference what group I'm in

I am everyday people, yeah, yeah

There is a blue one who can't accept
The green one for living with
A fat one tryin' to be a skinny one
Different strokes for different folks
And so on and so on and scooby-dooby-dooby
We got to live together

I am no better and neither are you
We're all the same, whatever we do
You love me, you hate me
You know me and then
You can't figure out the bag I'm in

I am everyday people

There is a long hair
That doesn't like the short hair
For being such a rich one
That will not help the poor one
Different strokes for different folks
And so on and so on, scooby-dooby-dooby
We got to live together

There is a yellow one that won't
Accept the black one
That won't accept the red one
That won't accept the white one
Different strokes for different folks
And so on and so on and
Scooby-dooby-dooby

I am everyday people