

"Don't Eat the Tablecloth"
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 6, 2021

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again 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.' ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen."



Sermon: *"Don't Eat the Tablecloth"*

At the center of the gospel is God's grace; the notion that God loves, forgives, and saves, not because of what we do to earn those gifts, but because God gives them freely, no strings attached. And at the center of the church's mission is the call to help people respond to that grace. Last week we talked about how those gifts not only show us how God behaves toward us, they also teach us how we are supposed to treat each other. But this morning's passage points to another aspect of our response to God's grace, and that is the expectation that if we are willing to accept God's gracious mercy and steadfast love, we should be willing to dedicate our lives to being God's disciples. It's not a requirement to receive the gift already given, but it is a reasonable expectation to respond to that gift with lives of discipleship.

I'll show you what I mean. This week Will Grey and I sat down and watched one of my favorite movies, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Maybe you've seen it or read the book by Harper Lee (both are excellent) and if you haven't, you really should.

One of my favorite scenes is when six-year-old Scout Finch sits down to lunch with her older brother Jem, her father Atticus, and a schoolmate named Walter Cunningham. Jem has invited Walter to lunch because Walter's parents are very poor and couldn't afford to send him to school with a lunch of his own. During the meal, Walter asks if there is any molasses in the house. When he is presented with the syrup pitcher, he begins to pour it over all his food. Everyone else is shocked by this, but it's Scout who impetuously asks him "What in the sam hill are you doing?!?" It's at this point that Calpurnia, the nanny and house servant to the family requests Scout's presence in the kitchen, where she receives a well-deserved scolding.

In the book, Harper Lee describes it this way:

“She was furious, and... when she squinted down at me the tiny lines around her eyes deepened. ‘There’s some folks who don’t eat like us,’ she whispered fiercely, ‘but you ain’t called on to contradict ‘em at the table when they don’t. That boy’s yo’ comp’ny and if he wants to eat up that tablecloth you let him, you hear?’”¹

By commenting on Walter’s choices at the dinner table, Scout had made a serious breach of the rules of hospitality. Calpurnia rightfully points out that being a good host means accepting some things you may not like if it means making your guest feel at home.

But if Walter’s parents had been there, they probably would have scolded him for his breach of etiquette. You see, the host has a responsibility to be hospitable. But the guest has a responsibility to act right, too. It’s a matter of respect and of showing proper thanks. Which is why this scene from *To Kill Mockingbird* connects with Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast for me. The King shows hospitality, freely given. But there is a clear expectation that the ones who receive that hospitality are supposed to act right when they receive it.

In other words, if you’re a guest in someone’s house, they should allow you to eat the tablecloth, without criticism, if that’s what you want to do. *But* if you’re a guest in someone else’s house, you should absolutely never, under any circumstances, ever, eat the tablecloth.

You see, as Scout Finch learned the hard way, the rules of hospitality govern the behavior of a host. But that doesn’t mean that as a guest, you aren’t bound by certain rules and expectations, too. A host should always treat a guest well. But when you’re a guest in someone else’s house, you should always act right.

We tend to celebrate God’s gift of grace. But we need to be reminded that there is a right way and a wrong way to receive gifts. And the proper way to receive a gift is to behave in such a way as to honor the gift giver. Our scripture reading this morning gives us a good example of this.

The man in Jesus’ parable has been invited in off the street to a wedding banquet for the son of the King. There were more illustrious guests invited, but they have all declined. Some with harsh responses. So, the King invites the regular folks to come and enjoy his hospitality. None of them have been planning for this so none of them is dressed appropriately. But somehow, almost all the guests found something to wear that was appropriate to the occasion. Maybe they had a chance to go home and put on something nicer. Or maybe, they were given appropriate wedding garments by their host, which was often the custom at weddings of the time. Either way, the guests have all found a way to show their thanks and respect to the host on this monumental occasion.

Except one. This man makes no effort to change his clothes or find something appropriate for the occasion. Whether this is the result of blissful ignorance or flagrant arrogance is unclear, but the result is the same: He enjoys the hospitality of his host while meeting none of the demands of common etiquette. He’s happy to belly up to the bar. He fills his plate from the buffet. He dances like no one’s watching. He enjoys the hospitality of his host to the fullest. But he forgets or ignores the fact that he has a responsibility to be a good and respectful guest.

In Matthew’s telling, the parable has become an allegory. The King represents God while his son, the bride groom represents Jesus. The marriage feast is the great feast of which Matthew writes back in chapter 8 saying “...many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven...”² The slaves sent out to bring in the guests are the prophets of Israel; while the ones

who turn down the invitation are the people of Israel who refused to listen. The gathering of the outsiders to come as replacement guests represents the evangelistic mission of the early church welcoming the gentiles, and the wedding hall can be seen as the church itself.

Early hearers and readers of this gospel would have understood the code and would have gotten Matthew's message. The chosen people of Israel have rejected God's messengers and now the gates of the kingdom are being thrown wide open to those who were previously left standing on the outside looking in. This is the picture of God's grace: that those who have no reason to be included in the sumptuous feast of the Lamb find themselves invited in, not because they deserve to be invited, but simply because God wants them there.

But once invited, the guests still have a responsibility to respond in a way that is respectful and that honors the generosity of their host. They should dress and act accordingly. That's why you shouldn't get too concerned about how unfair the host was for throwing out the poor fellow without the right wedding attire. This story isn't about the host... it's about the guests. You see, this story isn't meant to teach outsiders about God's grace. It's meant to teach insiders (those already in the early church) how to respond in the presence of that grace.

And that's where the garment comes in. In Matthew's telling of Jesus allegorical parable, the garment that is required is the one the author of Colossians describes later on in the New Testament. In the third chapter of Colossians we find these words:

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, *clothe yourselves with love*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.³

These are the garments appropriate for the banquet feast of God. For Matthew, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not just about receiving the gift of Grace. It is about responding to that gift with lives lived reflecting that grace of God into the world.

Again, this is not some sort of threat. We shouldn't hear this parable as suggesting if you don't act right, you can lose God's gracious gift of salvation, mercy, and steadfast love. When God gives a gift, there are no takebacks. There are no returns. But there is regifting. In fact, regifting is expected. It is proper etiquette to take the gifts God gives us and pass them on to others, especially gifts of grace, mercy, and steadfast love. Frankly, it would be rude *not* to. Regifting God's good gifts is exactly what we're expected to do if we are to act right at the banquet of God.

So here we sit, gathered together around the table of God. There is a sumptuous feast set before us and we are invited to eat and be filled. There is not a single thing we need do to be invited. You have been invited for no other reason than that the host loves you and wants you here. But out of love, respect, and thanksgiving to God who is our host; by whose gracious invitation we are seated together at God's table, we should be sure to conduct ourselves in a way befitting the King of all glory. We should love and serve God by loving and serving God's people. We should *clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love*, forgiving each other as God has forgiven us, not because it is required of us, but because it is the only appropriate response to God's grace.

What you're being asked to do is to join your host in that sumptuous feast. You can eat, you can drink, you can dance. You can even pour molasses all over your dinner if you want to. But dress appropriately, and deport yourself accordingly, and whatever our host *allows* you to do, please, please, don't eat the tablecloth.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Popular Library, 1962. 28-29. Print.

² Matthew 8:11, NRSV

³ Colossians 3:12-14, NRSV