

## SERMON- Proper 23 (A)

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Exodus 32:1-14

Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

October 15, 2023

Matthew 22:1-14

### OPENING:

God is the party planner extraordinaire,  
the cruise ship fellowship director,  
the Fraternity/ Sorority Social chair,  
the Coffee hour Hostess “with the ‘mostest.’”

God expansively/ needlessly/ graciously calls us into relationship with him.  
By inviting us to the wedding banquet, by summoning us to the great feast, and by offering us a place at the party.

That is my takeaway from our different Gospel reading,  
as the Lectionary tries to singlehandedly throw a monkey wrench into our  
Stewardship Campaign,  
as these parables use extreme language to engage and provoke us (when all we want  
to do is understand something literally and simplistically)  
AND as Israel, right now, erupts into violence and it is hard to hear these words  
without applying them somehow to the Gaza Strip and the Holy Land.

Still, this is what I am hearing God say:

“I am having a party, the invitations have been signed, sealed and delivered.  
All you have to do is accept.”

But, we insist on trying to fashion our own.

God says I have a table prepared before you, I have the fat calves and the oxen  
slaughtered,

BUT we say: can I customize the banquet so as to fit my personal preferences?

Our culture relentlessly tells us:

“You do you.”

“Tell your truth”

“Be the best version of your self.”

We believe, *religiously*, that the story of our lives is up for us to tell. That we are  
autonomous creatures, free agents that have been given the tools to do it all  
ourselves.

### GOSPEL

Our Gospel, the Gospel, offers us a different view.

It is Good News, even though it sounds like not so Good News.

Our faith tells us that we are not on our own, we are not in charge of our own story, we are not free agents.

It tells us, disconcertingly, that “our best selves” are actually not that great.

That can be a hard lesson to learn and I will preach this sermon to you all and also to myself, because I live in the same culture that you do.

A culture that says we are the product of our achievements, that we are “human doings” not “human beings” and that has convinced us that we have to earn our way into this wedding banquet, a banquet again that God has already set, prepared and invited us to, not on our own merits, but the merits of his gracious invitation.

This morning, let’s take a look at the type of party that we are being invited into, this banquet of God’s that pops up all across the Bible. I want to do so through our own modern-day rituals, specifically through our sacramental festivities of Weddings, of Funerals, and of Baptism, as we try to answer this call to God’s party.

## **MARRIAGE**

You get a sense of the importance placed on weddings in Israelite culture 2000 years ago from just a glance at Scripture.

They were week-long affairs where they pulled out all the stops.

In our culture today, I am not sure if we go to those lengths:

BUT there is no greater sin than having a wedding that does not express your individual personality in some way. Marriage and weddings have become settings where we announce our individualized achievement. While you are supposed to be forming a Christian community, instead the Wedding Industrial Complex force-feeds this idea that you need to make up your own vows, prayers, traditions, entrance rites, readings all by your lonesome.

God says that all you have to do is commit yourself to be together, to be naked together, it says somewhat scandalously in Genesis.

And yet we insist on all these preparations, and that you have to be somehow a completed person when you get married

Marriage, someone said somewhere, is now the capstone to our identity, rather than the cornerstone.

It reminds me of what C.S. Lewis said about Purgatory, which I realize is a weird analogue to marriage. Lewis writes that, with regards to salvation:

God says: “Welcome to the heavenly banquet!”  
And we reply: “Can I clean up a bit first?”

## **FUNERALS**

On that note, let’s move to Funerals:

Here, our culture offers a similar dynamic, insisting on trying to make the ritual about what the *deceased* did, through a eulogy or however, and, worse, some sort of test of the still-living and *their* ability to perform.

So families again believe that they will need to come up with, off their top of their heads, in this intense moment of grief, an entire systematic theology of what death means. And that the funeral preparations and execution somehow can prove our worthiness.

The Episcopal Church, and any liturgical tradition, will say or try to say: it’s already done. The feast is already prepared, we have been doing this for 2000 years. The Church already knows what the menu is, what the dress code, and where the directions lead.

We know it because God gave us that road map, this party invitation, in a thing called the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ.

With families at funerals, the toughest thing from a pastoral point of view always becomes something related to the casket or the urn and attempts to “dress it up.” Military veterans understandably want the flag there.

Others want a preponderance of flowers/ picture.

The Church believes that you should be dressed in the same thing as your baptism: a simple white garment that you wear as a symbol of your membership in the Body of Christ.

Now I usually fold when someone requests some modification (within reason.) But the strange scene at the end of the Gospel with the man without a garment, that is supposed to be about Baptism, and the tradition of being clothed in Christ in a white robe.

Remember when Queen Elizabeth died, I included her name on our Prayer List, and somewhat fatuously listed her as “Elizabeth Windsor.”

My point was that, now that the Queen is dead, she joined with us mere mortals. Her identity was with ours, she no longer had to put on an act, no longer had to claim through this accident of heredity that she was in any way different from the rest of humanity in God’s eyes.

She got to join the party, simply by being her.

## **BAPTISM**

This week, Julie Gomez called and we were talking about beautiful Mary Emmanuelle's baptism coming up in November and she asked what all mothers ask: "What should they wear?"

She said that she and Eric did not grow up in the Episcopal faith and wondered if there were rules about that sort of thing. There are none I told her. And she said that they have an ancestral baptismal gown that Eric wore and that they are going to pass that down. I said that's perfect.

But if she would show up in a burlap sack, that also would be perfect.

That's why infant baptisms are so wonderful, it's one of the only places where God's grace is still afforded by us, to others.

Think about it:

If the child is beatific and calm, people think it's a beautiful baptism.

If the child is splashing and chaotic and all over the place, people love it.

Whatever the child is dressed in, it's a joy and a gift and a party.

Jim Gaffigan, the Catholic comedian, he and his wife have 5 kids and he has this bit where he talks about whenever they were pregnant and people would ask: "Do you know if it's going to be a boy?" They would say "It's a boy" and people would be so happy. "A boy." Later, different pregnancy, same question asked, but now answered: "It's a girl" and people would be similarly so happy. Same reaction. This gracious joy and surprise, only two options...

## **CONCLUSION**

We offer that grace at baptism and at birth. We still do, thank God, in a world that is so achievement based. But not to ourselves, or our loved ones, at weddings and funerals, there we primp and come up with our own outfits and try to pretend like we are the ones throwing the party. That we are the ones creating the story.

Our Gospel says we worship a God who is so intent on having us into the party, that God will go to some difficult lengths if we refuse the invite. That's hard to wrap our heads around.

So, let's enter into the world of this difficult parable and face it, that's what I said last week. and then remember who is telling it.

Jesus, the man who would have dinner with anyone.

The man whose first miracle was at a wedding feast,

the one whose last act on earth was to tell us how to live our lives through a meal where all were invited and all will be cherished and feted and loved.

**AMEN**