

Accept or Decline?

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Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures

Isa 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

I am going to begin this morning with a story, one that is not my own, but from the preacher I heard the most growing up, the senior pastor of the church I attended from birth until I was 22, Southwest Christian Church in East Point, GA. For the majority of that time, Dr. Jim Donovan was the senior pastor, and in the Independent Christian Churches, we call our senior pastors, "Preacher." So to me he was "Preacher Jim." And he was particularly strong when it came to sermon illustrations. He had a particular and effective formula: to explain the passage for the week and how it was relevant to the life of a Christian today, and then he would drive the point home with a particularly poignant illustration or story. It was quite effective. I often found myself looking forward to this part of the sermon, and not just because it signaled that we could go to lunch soon!

One story he told, I remember it twice at the end of a sermon in about a decade of sermons, was about his twin sons, who were adults by this time. One Saturday morning when they were younger, during some sort of holiday celebration, the family was headed out to a parade. The boys were not enthused about this particular parade, and told their parents they preferred to sit at home for the morning and watch cartoons. And so just the parents went. What follows in Dr. Donovan's story is a laundry list of things that little boys would have loved, sights and smells and

tastes, all culminating in, at least in my memory, what would have been an opportunity for them to ride in the parade on a fire truck. As soon as mom and dad get home, they tell the boys all that happened at this parade. And the boys, still in their pajamas, ask one of the saddest questions possible at that moment: "Can we go to the parade *now*?" And of course they can't. The parade has already ended and even if their parents wanted to take them, the opportunity has passed. They had their chance to enter into the joyous celebration and that chance has passed. You can see how this story worked well at the end of a gospel sermon. That's what a good story can do.

Our Gospel reading today is one such good story, told by the greatest storyteller himself, about his kingdom, compared to a joyous celebration, a wedding feast, a party. And yet this tale of a joyous celebration is a warning to those who would opt out of the party. This parable serves, for us and for those who heard it the first time it was shared, a plea to make sure we respond to the invitation Jesus gives us to enter into the Kingdom.

And we need encouragement, because there are a lot of reasons that we could cite to not join in on the party. The fact they are bad reasons do not make us any less susceptible to falling for them. And so, working out from this parable from Jesus, I want to look at some of those reasons we opt out of living into God's Kingdom today, reasons we choose, like cartoons on a Saturday morning instead of choosing to go to a parade, that will leave us with the regret of missing out on what God has in store for us.

One of the main lies we can fall into is that what God has for us is not better than the status quo which we already have. If we are too attached to the comforts, the position, the stability of life as it is, the way of following Jesus may seem to upset that equilibrium in ways with which we are not comfortable. This is something the parable of the wedding banquet addresses directly. As Fr. Jack has encouraged us over these past couple of weeks to remember, these discussions and parables from this section of Matthew's gospel are occurring in the first few days of Holy Week, after the Triumphal Entry but before the Last Supper. From Matthew 21:23 we see that Jesus is speaking here in the Temple, to the chief priests and the Pharisees. Those chief priests would have been the Sadducees. These chief priests came from the well-connected political elite of Jerusalem, and they held to a "go along to get along" philosophy when it came to Rome. They thought that if they played nicely with imperial power, making a compromise here and there, they would continue to be allowed to worship God in the Temple. And not to mention they got to keep their cushy jobs and wield significant power for subjects of the Empire. Their lives were pretty good. They are represented in the parable by those guests who are invited, but have better things to do. They ignore the invitation and go, one to his farm, the other to his business. Some others who are invited see the change of pace of a wedding feast as so upsetting that they murder the servants who bring the invite - showing not only how the people of Israel had treated the prophets, but foreshadowing the treatment that Jesus would receive at the hands of the chief priests in just a few days time. No, to them, the banquet wasn't worth giving up what they were already doing.¹

¹ See Bird and Wright. *The New Testament in its World*, 104 ff.

I think we rush by this portion of the parable too quickly if we do not acknowledge in ourselves our tendency to hold onto the way things are when faced with the decision to follow God. "God, I know what you want me to do, but I really want to keep my job." "God I know what you want me to do, but maybe it can wait until I get a few things sorted out." We want to watch cartoons instead of going to the parade. What is it that holds you back? What do you need to surrender to God?

Each of these bad reasons for opting out of the party is based on a lie that we either tell ourselves or a lie that the world tells us. The lie behind opting out of the feast in favor of the comfort of the way things are is the lie of idolatry, of valuing the temporal above the eternal, of valuing the created over the Creator.

Next in the parable we get the command: "Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find." And the servants do that very thing; they go tell everyone of the good news so that the banquet becomes full. This is the scandalous beauty of the Gospel: everyone is invited. And that scandal can lead to another reason some of us choose to opt out of the feast that God throws: "those people" will be there.

This draws my mind to Jesus' story of the prodigal son, the one who comes home, but remember how that story ends, because there is a son who refuses to come into his father's house, because his disobedient, disrespectful, bad-reputation-ed brother is there. The story ends with the elder son being the prodigal.

So the lie that stands behind this reason for opting out is the lie that we are somehow deserving of God's love more so than the people we don't like. We can't let the extent of God's grace become a reason that we self select out of it. When we let our biases dictate who is in and out of the people of God, we run the risk of missing our own invitation. We must remember that God calls to all people, and if he calls to us in our sin, that means he calls to a lot of other people like us.

And this is where many of us would like the parable to end. As N.T. Wright acknowledges in his commentary, ending with the radical invitation and welcome of God is a pretty culturally acceptable place to leave things.² However, the parable goes on from there. The call to the main roads is of course for all, and it is a radical move of invitation and welcome. Grace is really amazing. And also God's love for us is such that it is not content to leave us where we are.

"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."³

Sometimes this parable can be a little distressing, because it may seem on the surface that someone got called into the wedding feast only to get kicked out for not having the right clothes. But let's think about this a little further. The king has told

² Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 82.

³ Matthew 22:12-14.

his servants to literally invite people off of the streets to come into the feast and yet only one is found to be not wearing a wedding garment. So either nearly everyone woke up that morning and decided to wear their best clothes for a walk around town, or somehow, the king was seeing that his newly invited guests had access to the proper attire.

The righteousness with which we are clothed by faith is not something that we bring to the table; it is something, a gift, that is generously offered to us. But the redeemed life is also something we have to put on ourselves. The process of sanctification is a discipline and a set of standards to which we have to recommit ourselves daily. Those baptismal vows, to deny ourselves, the world, and the devil, they need daily renewal. The call to pick up our cross comes to us each day, each hour, each moment. Otherwise we opt out of the banquet by refusing to let God change us through his love for the better.

The lie behind this opting out of God's kingdom banquet is the lie that all God cares about is the words we say, not the lives we lead. It's the lie that we don't have places to grow in obedience, that we don't have sin to address. If we are to attend God's wedding feast our hearts must be in it! That means those hearts and the lives attached to them will be formed ever more into the likeness of Jesus. If not, we'll find ourselves not appropriately dressed for the occasion.

I want to touch on one more reason that some may find themselves opting out of the divine invitation. While not directly present in the parable, it is something we see today. There are those who may choose to ignore God's invitation because they are

not convinced that he is truly good. Whether through their perception of the structures and boundaries that God places on humanity, or perhaps their understanding or misunderstanding of Scripture, or sadly, the way that they have been created by Christians or the Church, there are those who don't want any part of the party because they do not believe that God is truly good. And this is important as we seek to witness to our neighbors in a secular age. We must not forget that fundamental to the Christian belief, to the Christian faith is that God is in essence goodness and he loves those whom he has created.

But sometimes, for a host of reasons, that may be difficult to see. And so we need to be reminded. If you need to be reminded of God's goodness today, I offer these words from the prophet Isaiah. If you want to know what God's intentions are for the people of the Earth and you are wondering if they are good, you need look no further than this word written centuries before Jesus was born:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”⁴

If you hear nothing else this morning, I hope you hear that the one who invites you to the wedding feast is for your good. He is worthy of your trust.

I want to close with a word of encouragement to the introverts this morning. As a fellow introvert I often feel what has been immortalized in jokes and memes across the internet: the strange urge to cancel plans, even with people you enjoy and hold dear, just because of the mental energy it takes to be social. I have felt that pressure many times to cancel plans so I can just stay home and rest. But it is often that when I stick it out and make the effort at connection that I am so much more filled after a good night with friends than I would have been after a night of playing video games on my couch. We were wired for connection and belonging, not isolation and self-serving.

And if this is true of banquets and parties thrown by friends and neighbors, how much more is the payoff from opting in to the wedding banquet of the king of the universe. Saying yes, leaning in to the feast of God will fill us so that we can be truly satisfied, loved, and made whole. The invitation stands. Come to the banquet!

⁴ Isa 25:6-9