

WHEN WE ALL GET TOGETHER

by

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(Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; and Matthew 22:1-14

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.'

⁵"But 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.

⁸"Then 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.'

¹⁴"For many are called, but few are chosen."

I am going to do something in the sermon today that I don't usually do. In a few minutes, I am going to ask for a show of hands about what kind of sermon you would like to hear today. This could go badly, I know, but maybe it will tell us all something about who we are and where we are in our lives at this point in time.

I decided to do this because the scripture readings for today just go in so many different directions. I know some of you, quite a few actually, read the texts for Sunday ahead of time. We follow a three-year lectionary. The texts are known well in advance. We print them ahead of time. We offer several lectionary Bible

studies that actually read and reflect on the texts through the week. So some of you have thought about these texts at least some through the week. Most of you have heard them for the first time today. I just found each of our texts for today very engaging but very different. So, I am going to talk about each of them just a little, reminding you of the themes contained and then ask you to vote on which one you would like to hear a sermon on today, which one you would like to have an opportunity to go deeper with.

Now, to be honest, I gave some thought to not preparing a sermon until we voted and then just kind of freewheeling it on the text of your choice. I think I could do that. In reality, you are going to get the same sermon, however you vote, perhaps with some modification. I just want to see how you are thinking on this day at this time. So, here we go.

The passage from Exodus is about Moses leaving Aaron in charge while Moses is off on the Holy Mountain talking to God. It is kind of like the senior minister leaving town for something important and leaving the associate minister in charge. What happens in the story of course is that the people go wild. They forget about Moses, forget about God and make a golden calf to worship. And here's the theme. God is so angry with them, he wants to wipe them all out. But Moses deflects God's anger on the basis that it would be an embarrassment to God to act in such a way. These people, rebellious though they are, are your people after all, and you just can't do that. And the text says God changes his mind and doesn't bring disaster on the people. So we have a passage about sinful people, an angry God who is talked out of his anger, and punishment by Moses so that mercy prevails.

You have to hear all of the stories before you can vote.

The epistle passage is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, one of the churches in early Christianity. This is a very positive text. Basically, think good thoughts. Rejoice in the Lord always. Be gentle with one another, and the peace of God will be with you. Fill your mind with things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praise. Think about these things. No angry God here. Think good thoughts and the peace of God will be with you.

Now, the last choice. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet and the man inappropriately dressed, probably is the most complex of the readings. The king gives a wedding banquet for his son. No one on the invited list shows up. Some are too busy to go. Some make fun of the whole event. Some are just too mean to go. They mistreat and even kill the king's slaves. The king destroys those who refuse the invitation and burns their city, which seems a bit of an overreaction. Then the king sends his slaves that are left out into the streets to round up anybody they can find, both good and bad people. And they all show up. Would have been a good place to end the parable, but it doesn't end there. The king sees one fellow who is not wearing a wedding robe, who is not properly attired, has him bound hand and foot and thrown out into the outer darkness.

Many are called, few are chosen.

Now the Psalter today is about the goodness and mercy of God, so if you would like to hear a sermon on the Psalms, I'm going to ask you to vote for the Epistle lesson, because it has a similar theme.

Okay. Here we go. I hope this goes well. I am actually quite anxious to see how you are going to vote. You have to vote for one of the three choices, even if you don't care that much. You knew when you came today there was going to be a sermon of some kind.

How many of you would vote to hear more about the angry God who was talked into mercy by Moses?

How many of you want to hear a sermon about the difference that thinking good thoughts can make in your life, rejoicing in the Lord always? Okay.

How many would like to hear a little more about the angry king and the man who was inappropriately dressed?

Okay. The angry king it is.

You know I preached a sermon one time where I sang a song in the middle of the sermon. My children said to me afterwards, "Dad, don't ever do that again." This may be another one of those kinds of sermons.

Okay. Here's where I am going with this. I am going to say more about the parable, but in a sense, weave them all together. It is a very difficult parable. I would guess that those of you who voted for this one as the basis of a sermon did so because some things about the nature of the king who may represent God in the story are troublesome to you. What does the parable tell us about who God is?

No doubt there are some preachers who would love this parable. God is hard and judgmental in the parable, if you assume the God character is the king. The king invites people to the wedding banquet for the son. When those invited guests scoff at the invitation and mistreat the king's couriers, the king retaliates and gets even. He destroys the enemies and burns their city. It does seem an overreaction. Lots of people would have suffered for the sins of a few. Then the king invites all kinds of substitute guests to the banquet, good and bad alike. Okay. That's a little better.

Then the most troubling aspect of all, the poor fellow who is dressed inappropriately is thrown out, apparently the only one. Of course, there could be all kinds of speculation as to what it means to be at the wedding feast without a wedding robe. Just the face of it seems pretty harsh under the circumstances, but it is obviously symbolic of something else. That may be the key question: What is the meaning of the wedding robe?

Everyone is invited, but only those dressed appropriately can stay. At the very least, it means that not anything goes. There are guidelines, requirements as to how to behave at the banquet. I think it means you do the best you can to look like you belong as a guest of the king. Some things are not acceptable. There are expectations. I think the expectations are along the lines of living with love of God and neighbor, treating all people with respect. As I said, some preachers would love this text.

There would be others these days who would never mention this text. Too harsh. Not positive enough. Me, I fall somewhere in the middle. I like to struggle some with the meaning of this very difficult text. However you understand it, it's just one text. The whole understanding of our faith is not contained in this or any

one passage. In a sense, any Bible passage tells us as much about ourselves as it tells us about God.

We have three very different passages today because each one tells us something about our understanding of God. I like to think of reading the Bible as having a conversation with God. It is an ongoing conversation. Sometimes it goes in one direction; sometimes it goes in another direction. We have three very different passages about who God is because you and I, along with those who wrote the various passages of the Bible, find the reality of God to be multifaceted.

Does God's anger turn to mercy as when Moses reminded him of who God is? It does.

Do Christ-like people live with gentleness, think good thoughts and find peace in God? They do.

Are there ways of living that do not reflect the ways of Christ and are therefore unacceptable? Yes, of course so.

All of these passages and all of the others in the Bible give us some insight as to who God is. None of them by themselves give us the complete picture.

I had a discussion this week with someone who has experienced some very tough times recently. She told me that she tells God in no uncertain terms how she feels about that. She's ready for a break. God knows we can have that kind of conversation, she said. It is in deep honest conversations with God, with the Bible, and with ourselves that we learn something about God and about ourselves.

So, I vote for all three of these passages and all the rest of them, the ones I like and the ones I don't like, the ones I kind of understand and the ones I don't understand at all. Taken together, in deep conversation, we learn something about ourselves and about the nature of God.