

Sunday January 29, 2023
Lesson 9: A Seat At The Table
Scripture: Matthew 22: 1-14

Context:

We continue our unit “Power and Belonging” with a jump to the gospel of Matthew. The lesson today focuses on a parable Jesus told. Parables were a form of storytelling to make a heavenly point for those listening and Jesus often utilized them to catch his listeners’ attention and to step on their toes. Today’s lesson and parable invites us to embrace God’s invitation to everyone to join God’s family and live authentic Christian faith in response.

When Jesus told a parable he was usually answering a question someone had presented. In this parable with the kingdom and the wedding feast, Jesus responds to those who challenge his authority by which he is teaching people.¹ The parable is about judgment, as the ending contains individuals receiving treatment for how they responded to authority and other people.

As Jesus tells this parable to his audience, one can see the issues present in who hears the message. There are questions of hospitality, authoritative demands and requests, and being prepared. When reading this story, we should pay attention to allegory and be wary of giving one specific meaning as we then lock the parable into our own terms. If one was to assign Jesus as the King who threw out the poor man who could not find a wedding tunic and try to find a group or person who fits this mold, we lose the point and provocative nature of the parable.

For Jesus, the parable points to how we relate to others and how we are to be aware of the relationships and people in front of us. The king’s order is refused by the nobility; they show how they miss out on things in front of them. Slaves who go and do their king’s bidding invite all, showing the emphasis on hospitality in Jesus’ culture. And the guest who comes without a wedding tunic demonstrates a willingness to show up to events, and yet not bring an open mind or way of being to life.

Yet it is also important as we read this text to think of the time in which the gospel of Matthew was written. For example, one reads of burning the city of the rebels and thinks of how this is such a strange scene to include as a negative response to a wedding reservation. Yet the burning of the rebels’ city could be an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, echoing those who might have viewed such an event as God’s punishment upon the people. While it may not be sound theology, it reflects the thought processes of the time as Christians tried to make sense of where the gospel fit and what Jesus came to do.

The final saying in the parable draws many Christians to attention: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” The parable speaks to discipleship and how many are given the invitation to follow God and respond to the call placed on their lives. The function of the statement is not to give a cryptic allusion to who will be saved and who will be damned as it is more of an encouragement to vigorous effects to live the Christian life.² To follow the Lord demands something of those who hear the call.

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A., “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 251.

² *Ibid.*, 252.

Application

Have you ever received an invitation where you did not want to go to something? If honest, even the most excited extrovert might admit there are certain invites where a “no” stands on the tip of their tongue, even if the calendar is wide open. Whether it’s the wedding of an awkward old friend, a family reunion where the family is known for a dramatic flair, or a boring work party, there are some events where we just do not want to go.

I have concluded after years of being raised in polite Southern society to learn the power of the word “no” and knowing one’s limits. There are of course times, we should go to events due to the love we possess for others even if it’s not our favorite thing. And there are times where we might be surprised if we go to something at how much we enjoy the event.

A few years ago, a member of my covenant group shared how they read a book where they learned the power to “say no to say yes.” In this mind frame, when we say no, it allows us to say yes to something else. And this yes is powerful because we get a say and we feel it deep in our gut of how much we need this thing. Yet it means we must say no to other things, in spite of what others think or desire, or even what is the most popular thing of the day.

The parable today has people placing their priorities in various places. Some of it is for work. Others because they want to do something else. And for others they beat the messengers, being content to stir up drama and rouse the anger of a king.

Yet the focus is on the people who say yes to the invitation from the king. Besides the one who doesn’t change their clothes for the event, all are given the chance to follow and pursue what is offered unto them. Nobility and peasantry, the saint and the sinner, are all given a chance to come to the party.

For those of us in the Christian tradition, we might interpret our own faith story and opportunity to be a part of the body of Christ as we read this story. We hear of those who are excited to come, to be given an invitation. They do not use excuses and they prepare with the best given unto them. They show up, excited to be there.

As I read this parable and thought on the introduction with the “say no to say yes,” I thought about how we might view the church and how we say yes to God. Lately, I have heard people do a lot of complaining and grumbling. They do not like this about the church or the denomination, so they quit, they grumble, they leave in a huff, or like one set of disgruntled invitees, they hurt other people to get their way. The result is a big mess and people not seeing the bigger picture of being a part of the body of Christ and saying yes to Jesus.

The Christian faith is not based on us getting what we want, treating people as steppingstones, or pleasing your great-aunt who believes everyone is going to hell unless they believe just like her. There is so much more to following Jesus which may or may not fit in with those around us. The Christian faith is based on saying yes to following Jesus even if it means offending good “religious” folks or it convicts you to stay true to your vows even as others break them.

Saying yes to following Jesus means there are some invitations we will need to turn down, unlike our friends did in the parable who missed the wedding feast. It’s okay to say no to colleagues with hidden agendas who invite you to lead charges against their other colleagues. It is okay to say no to friends who want you to do things which hurt other people. It is okay to saying no to theologies which are hateful or dismissive of others.

Jesus invites all to dine at his table and wants all there. Yet there are people who will choose other things. And there will be people who want tables where only certain people are allowed. Yet for us, he invites us to see all part of the family of the Christian faith and for us to

live as authentic Christians in response.

How do you say no to say yes? Why is following God's call on your life more important than following the call of others? What is the beauty in not joining in slanderous talk or paying attention to divisive people? How is the open table so important to our Christian identity? What happens when we say yes to things which truly give us life?

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