

Series: The Words of Jesus—Private Instructions
Today: Responding to the Invitation
Text: Matthew 22:1-14

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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Things aren't always what they appear to be, are they? Perhaps you remember the television commercial of a few years ago where a man was preparing a romantic dinner for his wife. He chops vegetables with a large knife, while tomato sauce simmers on the stove. A white cat comes along and knocks the pan of sauce onto the floor and then falls into the mess, and just as the man picks up his tomato-splattered cat, his wife opens the door. She sees him holding a cat dripping with red sauce in one hand and a large knife in the other. Things aren't always what they appear to be.

So it is with the parable which Jesus told his disciples in our text for the morning. The parable is really two parables in one. It is the story of grace and it is a story of judgment, but before you ask the question of how God can be both, please hear me out; for things are not always as they seem.

GRACE

Parables are what Jesus used to tell us about the nature of God, and this particular story is about the inclusive nature of God. It is the story of a King who is planning a wedding for the Crown Prince, and cultural context is important to this story. In accordance with Jewish custom, the king sends out his servants to let the guest list know that he was planning a wedding. It was not unusual for the date not to be set. The date was not known, but the word to the invited guests was to be ready. All they needed to

know was that in the next few days there would be a wedding feast the likes of which they had never seen.

When one was invited to the wedding of a future King, the calendar is to be cleared of all other pressing matters. There is nothing more important than the wedding of the Prince; not work, not school, not social obligations, nothing was to be more important. You were asked to be ready so that when the King calls, the subjects were to be ready to respond. However, in the story of Jesus, the people weren't prepared. They had become busy with other things. In their own minds, these were important things-- family, career, and other things which demanded both time and attention.

This parable appears in both Matthew and Luke. Luke's telling of the story is far more gracious and focuses more clearly on the inclusive nature of God. However, in Matthew, Jesus is speaking to Jewish people. Years before they had been invited by God to be God's chosen people, yet when the Son of God came into the world, they treated him with contempt. Even though they were looking for the Messiah, they had become distracted by the things which the world called successful and they were ill-prepared to listen for the call of God in their lives.

A speaker at the conference I attended last week gave a good illustration of this. He spoke of his trips to the Maasai Mara in East Africa; a place where our mission teams often go to decompress after 12 days among the poor of Africa. I have been privileged to go to on three safaris to Maasai Mara, so I resonated with his description. Of this magical place he says: *“The Maasai Mara is a vast expanse of natural habitat which stretches over the fertile plains of East Africa. Here, elephant, cheetah, gazelle, wildebeest, water buffalo, giraffe, crocodile, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, and hundreds of*

other furry or scaly, tusked or horned, fleet-foot or slithering, flying or crawling, sun-loving or night-stalking creatures roam and soar and wade and burrow, without fear of man.

But the guides I had for the two trips could not have been more different from one another. The first guide, Stephen, made the trip a thing of joy and wonder and endless surprise. The second guide, William, almost ruined the trip entirely.

The difference was one thing: Stephen paid attention; William didn't. Stephen had good eyes; William didn't. I don't mean the power and clarity of their organ of sight. I mean, Stephen looked at the right thing at the right time with the right focus. And William didn't.

Stephen was a Maasai man in his early 20's who grew up a few miles from the very ground we crossed together. The land was in his blood—every hillock and grove and bend of the river. He knew in his bones the personal histories of many of the animals we saw. He had an intuition for finding animals that, at least to a suburban-living white guy like me who thinks a squirrel is a major wildlife sighting, seemed supernatural. He would stop and gaze at something two kilometers in the distance. It looked to me like more grass and acacia, but he would drive toward it. Maybe 300 yards away, I'd finally see what he saw: a mother rhino and its baby grazing in scrub brush or a pride of lions sleeping beneath a tree or a pair of cheetahs sunning themselves on a shelf of rock.

William was a Comba man in his mid-50's who grew up in Nairobi. He couldn't see for looking—but he wasn't looking anyhow. He spent most of his time chatting on his CB with his friends. He just followed the crowd. Wherever other vehicles congested, he went. We saw the animals, yes. But we saw them from within a swarm of dozens—

sometimes hundreds—of other sightseers, each jockeying for a better view. One time we were traveling alone from the pack. A herd of elephants grazed at the roadside, mere feet away. William sailed past them, because he didn't see them.

"William!" we yelled. "Elephants!" "Huh? Where?" (Source: Mark Buchanan, in his sermon "The Kingdom of God Is Like...")

William is like those who could not respond to the invitation because they had become distracted. Pay attention, or you could miss it entirely if you choose to look at the wrong thing.

Jesus says that the consequence of God's chosen people being distracted is that they miss the invitation. They do not heed the invitation of God to come to the banquet, so he chooses to fill his table with those whom society would call outcasts. The servants are instructed to go and invite the "good and the bad" (the gentile and the sinner) to accept the invitation rejected by the people whom you might expect to be invited to such an occasion; to come and fill the banquet hall. The grace of God is extended to all.

Heidi Baker is one of our missionaries to the poor in Mozambique. She writes about a vision she had: *I saw the wedding feast of the Lamb. There were huge, long tables laid out with the most beautiful food I have ever seen. I heard the Lord say, "Wake up, Church! Wake up, Church! The feast is about to begin! The poor have not yet been called, and My house is not yet full. I want My house to be full!"*

Then I saw the Lord Jesus dance on the garbage dump, and I was with Him. As He called, the children and youth began to follow and dance with us. Together, Jesus and I would stop and touch them; their bloated bellies would become flat, and their infected wounds healed. Their hair, turned brown by malnutrition, would become black and shiny.

He put beautiful garments of purple, blue, gold, and silver on them. He led them out of the dump and into the wedding feast and said, "You sit in front!" And the hungry children from the garbage dump sat at the head table.

I've worked in the garbage dump ever since, and many hundreds of children and youth have met the Lord and are being fed physical and spiritual bread.

The point is that the grace of God is extended to all of us. However, we need to respond to that grace, and when we busy ourselves with things which do not lead us closer to the will of God in our lives, we miss the invitation which God offers to all of us. We must be clear here. God's intention is that the banquet table be inclusive, but some of us will fail to listen for the invitation because we are just too busy.

JUDGMENT

We cannot leave these words of Jesus without saying something about the image of a final judgment which is in this parable. However, before we do, it will be good for us to understand something of the wedding customs in the time of Jesus.

It was the responsibility of the host at the wedding to provide everyone with the proper attire. If one could not afford the proper wedding robe and he/she was an invited guest, the proper wedding attire would be provided. So the fact that the king confronts a guest who is not properly attired is not a matter of harshness. It is a matter of hospitality. It was the choice of the man who would have been provided the appropriate wedding robe not to be dressed properly. The King would have provided him with proper attire. He is the one who is choosing, by his own willfulness, to go his own way.

So it is that God provides the garments of grace for each of us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but the choice is still ours. We can put them on, or we can

remain just as we are. The choice is ours, and so are the consequences of choosing to go our own way.

There is an old chestnut of a story which preachers like to tell about this part of the text. It seems there was a street evangelist who was trying to get the attention of passersby. He urged those near him to flee from the wrath to come. "I warn you," he roared, "that there will be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!" An old woman in the crowd shouted snidely: "Sir, I have no teeth!" "Lady," the evangelist retorted, "teeth will be provided!"

William Willimon tells the story of an early experience he had in the ministry. Early in his ministry, he served a little church in rural Georgia. One Saturday we went to a funeral in a little country church not of my denomination. He had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open, and the funeral consisted of a sermon by their preacher.

The preacher pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket. He said, "It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to spend more time with his family. He might have wanted to do that, but he's dead now. It is too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of decision."

Then the preacher told how a Greyhound bus had run into a funeral procession once on the way to the cemetery, and that that could happen today. He said, "You should decide today. Today is the day to get your life together. Too late for old Joe, but it's not too late for you."

Willimon says, *"I was so angry at that preacher. On the way home, I told my wife, "Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting."*

She said, *"I've never heard anything like that. It was manipulative. It was disgusting. It was insensitive. Worst of all, it was also true."* (Source: William Willimon, in his sermon "The Writing on the Wall," PreachingToday.com)

Conclusion

Things aren't always as they seem. Judgment can really be grace refused, and grace can come with the expectation of a response. The choices are always left up to us. We are the ones who must respond to the invitation which God provides. The choice is always ours.