

## Pentecost 19

October 11, 2020

### Join the Party Matthew 22:1-14

I wonder what makes for a good party. Is it a special occasion? I don't think so; I've been to some wonderful get-togethers when there was no occasion at all.

Is it the food? I love the food and it's important to me, but I've eaten some good food at lousy parties. Is it the space, the decorations, the house? That helps, I guess, but I've been to dull parties in beautiful homes, and I've been to delightful parties in cramped and crummy apartments.

What makes a good party? I think it's good guests. Get together a group of people who want to mingle, meet new folks, play games, tell jokes, sing songs, swap stories, and you'll have a good time. Whether it's a dress-up dinner or a Pimochle tournament or a class reunion, gather some folks who will give themselves to the occasion, and you'll have a real party.

Once upon a time God sent out invitations to a great party — a wedding feast — and the invited guests all made excuses and begged off. So, God sent servants into the streets to bring in all comers. This was a party for everybody and anybody: nice people and obnoxious people, the well-heeled and the down at the heels, respectable citizens, and shady characters. Anybody who wanted to party was welcome at the party.

In fact, the only person who gets kicked out of the party is one guy who isn't wearing party clothes. Let me give you some background. We're not completely sure, but scholars believe that at well-to-do wedding parties in those days, the guests were given a suit of festive dress-up clothes when they arrived. These complimentary party clothes were a way to make the feast more fun, and they also served as a lavish thank-you gift from the host.

So when the host looks around and sees this fellow over by the crab dip, this fellow in street clothes, it's not that the guy can't afford party clothes, or left them at home by accident, or didn't know this was a dress-up affair. No, he just doesn't want to dress up for the occasion. He's not here to throw himself into the joy of the party. He's just here for himself.

He's here to eat little hot dogs on toothpicks and drink for free and fill his pockets with those matchbooks that have the happy couple's names embossed in silver letters. He's not here to give himself to the party, he's just here to get whatever he can get.

And what he gets is kicked out! The prostitutes and the pick-pockets and the drunks get to stay, because they've gotten so caught up in the party that they've forgotten everything else. But this guy who won't put on party clothes, who won't throw himself into the joy of it, he has to go.

In the parable, the party, of course, represents the kingdom of God. God's

new order in Jesus Christ really is open to everybody. That's why Jesus was so often criticized for eating with tax collectors, chatting with foreigners, befriending ladies of the evening. Jesus took that criticism in stride. He said, "A doctor doesn't make house calls for healthy people. A doctor spends time with sick people! And that's why I have come into the world, not for the healthy, but for the sick and sinful and lost."

In fact, the only ones for whom Jesus had no patience were the religious people who believed it was enough to go through the motions. These upright people believed that if you do the right things, visit the Temple, give alms, memorize verses, then that's enough. That's all God expects.

But that's not all God expects. God wants us to throw our whole selves into the party, to be so swept up that we forget to be reserved, we forget to be proper and dignified, we abandon ourselves in the sheer joy of God's goodness, and having lost our old selves we find our new selves.

A woman called a pastor. someone he'd never met before. Let's say her name was Sonya. Sonya said, "I'd like to have my children baptized."

The pastor said, "That's wonderful. Let's make an appointment, and we'll talk about that."

Sonya was immediately suspicious. She said, "What do we have to talk about? Are you going to tell me I have to join your church to have my kids

baptized?"

The pastor said, "Sonya, **baptism is** joining the church."

Sonya said, "No, no, I don't want to belong to a church. I just want to baptize my kids. All you minister's want to turn this into something complicated. Just forget the whole thing." Then she hung up.

Months later, the pastor is still thinking about Sonya, wishing she hadn't slammed down the phone, wishing he could have said to her, "Sonya, we don't charge for baptisms. We're not going to shake you down. God's gifts are always free. There's no cover charge for God's party.

"But don't kid yourself, either. Don't think you can hang out at the party without putting on a wedding garment. Don't think you can have God without God having you. This is the paradox of grace, Sonya. God's love costs us nothing, and at the same time, it costs us everything.

If you just want to be on the guest list without giving yourself to the party, if you want salvation without commitment, if you want grace without discipleship, then I can't baptize your children, Sonya.

"But if you're looking for something so wonderful that you could give yourself to it without regret, if you want a two-way relationship between yourself and the Lord of life, if you long for a direction and a cause and a fountain of joy, then let's talk."

But Sonya's not here today, as far as I know. It's just us. And the question for us is, what does it take to make a good party? The same thing it takes to make a good church.

Folks who come together not just to get, but to give something. People who sing every song as if it were their favorite. People who laugh as if there's a happy ending ahead. People who love as if they've never been hurt and dance as if nobody's looking.

People who discover themselves by losing themselves in the ocean depths of God's unsearchable love. People who will put on the garments of joy — people who will put on Christ and join the celebration.

This is all the Good News that Matthew in the last sentence of his Gospel reminds us that we need to GO and spread to the whole world. We need to GO with the Gospel - that is the reason we exist here in the Prospect Heights and Wheeling area of greater Chicago – TO GO WITH THE GOSPEL – That is our stewardship theme this October as we plan our mission and ministry for 2021 and beyond.

Who is on God's guest list? Not just the good and the righteous. No! Who is on God's guest list? Anyone and everyone who will put the wedding robe on, and God gives us that robe free of charge. Now, we need to put God's

great party — God's great kingdom — ahead of everything else.

Amen!!