**Sermon for October 15 2023 Matthew 22:1-14 “Quid Pro Quo”**

Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, 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.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then 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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.

As near as I remember it, his name was Jason. He was a passable baritone singer in a small local community theatre group, and they were casting for a production of Man of La Mancha. And Jason had the unenviable distinction of being the leading man in that company, every time. Truly a big fish in a small bowl, partly because they never really searched around very far for other thespians. But man of La Mancha, mind you, is a big production, very nearly operatic in its demands, and so they advertised the auditions far and wide, since they needed a lot of folks.

Jason wasn’t worried…he wasn’t even concerned enough to prepare a new audition piece, like, say, something from the show at hand. He sang his usual, got his usual applause, and sat down in his smugness till the auditions were finished. There *were* some other baritones who came to audition for the role of Don Quixote, but they were mediocre, and he was sure of his success. The auditions wound down to the last few minutes, and the adjudicators were packing up their paperwork when a call came from the back of the theater – “I am so sorry! I am I too late to sing?” And there came a man striding down the aisle that, frankly, just took everybody’s breath away. He was tall, with a swimmer’s build and longish, curly black hair and beard. They were quick to grant him an audition and he had prepared, not some stale standard of the stage, but rather the best song in the show, ‘The Impossible Dream’. He released his first few notes, and I watched Jason’s spirits deflate, getting more and more despondent with each passing phrase. And when this usurper ended the song on the optional ringing high G, that’s really up there for a baritone, the room just went wild, all but one. Poor Jason…in the theatrical sense at least, he learned the painful lesson that Jesus is teaching us again today: that many are called, but few are chosen.

Jesus loved to teach in metaphors, and sometimes they are quite obscure, but not today. This recording of his teaching by St. Matthew was penned in the early 80’s, fifty-odd years after Jesus’ time on earth. The central historical event of the time for Matthew, and the Jewish people, and the early Christians who were still defining themselves, was the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, in Jerusalem, in the year 70 CE, at least ten years earlier. This ‘metaphor’ of a *king* giving a wedding feast for his *son* isn’t too tricky to figure out, especially when the invited guests are too busy to attend, and then outright abuse and kill the messengers who are trying to invite them to celebrate the new union. The parallels with history are just too precise: God invites the Jewish people to celebrate his Son, Yeshua, in his new union with his bride, the chosen people. But they do not agree to come; they resist mightily, and persecute and murder God’s messengers. At that point the soldiers come, Roman soldiers, widely interpreted at the time as divine vengeance on an unfaithful people, and destroy the epicenter of Jewish religious identity. Nevertheless, the feast is ready and the wedding will take place, although the bride has changed, a shy, incoherent, international gathering of those who love the son, and she will eventually become known as the Church, the Bride of Christ.

At this point, the room is full, and the food is delightful, although it could be warmer. The king comes in to see the guests - there’s a departure from the usual, right there – and notices that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. And after a tiny discussion, in which the guest is too dumfounded to even reply, the king has this unfortunate tossed right out the door, into the space for weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the point of this whole elaborate tale is finally given: for many are called, but few are chosen.

It is tempting, and way too easy, to make the king the bad guy in this story. He takes retribution on those who not only would not come, but who persecuted his messengers. He seems to settle for any old person as a wedding guest, but then criticizes and ostracizes one guest for not dressing up. Tempting and easy to make the king the villain of the piece, but not very accurate. Because the villain of this melodrama is…humanity. People. Maybe even us.

Why would I say such an outrageous thing? Let’s look at the story again…the king wants to have a big celebration, a wedding feast. He and the son make out the guest list, friends and associates of the family, the chosen ones. Preliminary invitations are sent out, but no RSVP’s are forthcoming. None! And so the king sends a more formal and detailed invitation, a more tempting invitation: look, guys, we’ve been cooking for days now, all the best savory and sweet dishes, you will never have a feast like this again, so come on, join us to celebrate! This time the RSVP’s do come in, but they are quite disappointing; sorry, too busy, have other plans, and some of the responses come in the form of abuse and death of the messengers. Kind of the opposite of hospitality, right? Dismissive and arrogant and self-absorbed, they were, and these attitudes are not dealt with lightly.

Here is where the big clue drops into place: *Then the king said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’* We need to notice that the unworthiness of the original invitees is tied, not to their character, but to their choices. The king offered an invitation to participate; they said, yeah, nah, thanks anyway. So the king goes looking for others: willing, available, whose minds are open to the wonders before them, whose hearts are not fixated on excuses but are open to opportunities. So they all straggle in, quite a mix, and the banquet room is full, and the king decides to pay a visit among the hoy-poly. And while he is there, another ‘unworthy’ one is identified: “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? This isn’t a midnight burger at In and Out; this isn’t a backyard barbecue, this is a wedding feast!” I, myself, am quite a casual dresser, but even I wouldn’t go to a black-tie event in shorts and a t-shirt! The guest is rudely dismissed, again not for his character, but for his choices. He could have dressed in his best, whatever that was, but his lack of effort and respect was both noticed and punished.

Where this story gets our attention is in the last line, the summary of the tale: for many are called, but few are chosen. And I would submit that all of the disqualifications listed by Matthew were not the *actions* of a mean old king so much as they were *inactions* among folks on the guest list. Finally, this teaching brings us to the church, our earthly version of the wedding feast, our perpetual celebration of the union between us and Christ, and our time to gaze in Life’s mirror and see how we are looking.

How *are* we looking, in comparison to the wayward guests? Is our RSVP a resounding yes, or are we more like the guests that beg off with one excuse after another? Are we thrilled by the invitation, or does it feel like just another obligation on life’s long list? Here’s the bottom-line truth: attending a wedding feast takes time! In what we call the Near East, these celebrations often span many days. But just because we have broken our feast into manageable chunks, created a weekly gathering for an hour or so at a time, does not get us out of the predicament that being part of this celebration, that being the Bride of Christ, that pursuing the Christian faith, it takes time! Take time to be holy, the hymn says, and we hum along, comforted but not challenged. I would submit that we must *choose* to honor the king and not just leave our faith practice to whatever is convenient on a given day. I would submit that *all* are called by God, all are invited, but few choose to really follow through, really give their lives to celebration and honor, really take the time to dance with the other wedding guests!

I end as we began, with the tale of poor Jason, the Don Quixote who never was. Complacent, not convicted, he wandered in, assuming that the glory would already be given to him. Confident, not clever, he couldn’t be bothered to learn a new song, but sang his tired old audition piece for judges who had perhaps heard it one time too many already. Cocky, not charitable, he rolled the dice in thinking that his minimum commitment would suffice, as it always had before. But he was cast into the outer darkness, friends, as one who was not worthy of the greatness he thought was his right. Word to the wise – don’t be a Jason! Amen.