

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Texts: Phillipians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

October 12, 2008

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

“Excuses! Excuses!”

401K's - Mutual Funds - Money markets - Retirement Accounts - Stock Portfolios.....

We have a couple of members in the congregation who are experts at these things, but for most of us - it's become very confusing. What has really turn all of this into a Financial Crisis? I know of someone who would have understood the stock market these past few weeks. I don't mean The Taxpayer Robbery that they are calling a “Bailout”. No one I know can understand that 700 billion Main Street bailout of Wall Street. It does seem a bit hypocritical when fat-cats want to privatize profits - but socialize losses? But what people are trying to understand is the Roller Coaster up and down - more down at the moment - of the Stock market. The person who would have understood this is the Apostle Paul.

Paul pioneered a new form of accounting: everything that had traditionally been counted as “gain” was suddenly turned upside down and revealed to be a “loss.” All those brokerage firms and banking giants that were doing so “well” at financing mortgages were suddenly drowning in red ink. Paul understands this, because it was the same discovery Paul made on the Damascus road. Here was a man with a rich life of privilege, pedigree, scholarship, influence, power, and Torah-affirmed righteousness. But one day on the road to Damascus, Paul suddenly found himself at zero. Even less than zero! A flash of light, a heavenly voice, and all accounts were transferred from one side of Paul's life-ledger to the other. What use to be important didn't seem so important anymore. All that Paul had been born into; all that Paul had achieved through study and hard work; all the righteousness that Paul had tallied up by doing the right things: it was all suddenly worthless to Paul. The faith of Christ, and Paul's new-found gift of faith in Christ, had brought a blessing into Paul's life that turned his world upside down.

The Apostle Paul knew that when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus, things are not going to be what is expected. Paul says to expect that. In his letter to the Phillipians that we read today, he explains that the Peace of God surpasses all understanding! He's saying that we can't begin to try and understand why Jesus does the things the way he does. So he tells the Phillipians to keep on doing the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. And by doing these things we will receive a Peace from God that surpasses our understanding. That's what faith is all about. Not having to understand everything God does, but just rejoice in that fact that he does these things.

For example, look at Jesus' explanation of the Kingdom of God that he tries to describe in the parable of the Wedding Banquet in today's Gospel from Matthew. A wealthy father planned an extravagant dinner for his son's impending marriage. No expense was spared. An elegant dining room at the town's most elite hotel was reserved. Fresh lobster was flown in and

thick, juicy steaks were purchased. The finest linens were laid out with china and silver. An orchestra was hired and valet service was arranged. Then invitations were sent out to the elite of the community. "You are invited to a wedding dinner. R.S.V.P." To the surprise and dismay of the father, excuses came pouring in. Some of them were just too hard to swallow. One man, a real estate speculator, had bought some property and needed to inspect it. At night, no less! Another couldn't leave his store. Some one else was picking up a New Car. Others told of similar conflicts. Excuses, excuses, excuses. Not a single invitation was accepted. The father was angry. "Those so and so's will never get another invitation from me," he grumbled.

And he sent some of his employees down into one of the worst sections of town and said to them, "I'm going to have a banquet for my son. Take whoever will come. Rich people, poor people, respectable people, winos. I don't care. I want that dining hall filled for that banquet." And his employees did just as they were told, and that night a festive occasion was had by all those who came to the rehearsal dinner.

You should recognize this story as an abbreviated and updated version of Jesus' parable in the twenty-second chapter of Matthew. There was a true modern day equivalent to that story in the newspapers not too long ago. Kathleen Gooly was all set for her wedding, had given the caterer a \$4,000 non-refundable deposit for the reception, and suddenly found herself without a groom. Since she was out the money for the caterer anyway, she contacted shelters for the homeless and drug rehabilitation centers to compile her new guest list. She figured someone should enjoy the banquet!

The obvious meaning behind Jesus' parable is that the righteous people of his day rejected him. So the Father opened the invitation to His banquet to all who would come, righteous and unrighteous alike. The invitation that God gives to us is one to a feast as happy as a wedding reception. The invitation God gives us is a joyous one. If we think of Christianity as some kind of gloomy giving up of everything which brings laughter and sun-shine and happy fellowship to life, then we have the wrong idea about our faith. It's a party that we are invited by our king. It is joy that we miss out on, if we refuse and do not attend the banquet.

Jesus was the kind of person who often withdrew for prayer and meditation; but a great majority of his ministry was in the "swing of things." He went to wedding receptions. He attended banquets of sinners. He took part in parties that the Pharisees held. Christ broke the dismal, religious laws of the temple and the Hebrew people. He often celebrated with those people as well as suffered and mourned with them. Jesus never pictured God as a tyrant who had to be appeased by long, sour faces and dismal refrains that looked suspiciously on anything happy. So we see that the invitation that we receive from God to the feast is a happy one.

But that's not true with everyone. Some are like the woman arrived late for a wedding. As she came rushing up to the door, an usher asked her for her invitation. "I have none," she snapped. "Are you a friend of the groom?" he asked. "Certainly not!" the woman replied, "I'm the bride's mother."

You and I are invited to a wedding feast of joy, and we are the friends of the king. Once Winston Churchill received an invitation from George Bernard Shaw to one of his opening plays back in the early 1900s. The note read, "Enclosed are two tickets to the performance of a play of mine. Bring a friend - if you have one." Churchill sent back this reply: "Dear GBS, I thank you very much for the invitation and tickets. Unfortunately, I am engaged on that night, but could I have tickets for the second night? - if there is one."

We have been invited to God's party. Not just that heavenly banquet after we die, but the party that is going on now - in this life! I like this invitation from the King because it tells us a lot about the kind of invitation Christ gives to us. He doesn't try to frighten us with threat of hell to get us to come to the banquet. Instead, he appeals to us with this story of all those who did not come and what they missed. If we turn down the invitation we are some day going to be heart-sick when we realize what we missed all those years. Then we will know that we have cheated ourselves out of a rich and fulfilling life. We still have the "burn in hell" scare technique used by preachers, but that's not the way that Christ appealed to us. His appeal was always "how much more." He always said to us that we could have a better, fulfilled existence if we accepted his invitation.

You and I have a great banquet prepared for us. God invites us to come and celebrate with him. If I were to ask many of you your most common complaint about life, it would be, there is not enough time. We are desperate to squeeze just a few more minutes into every day. A young wife called a newspaper office and asked for the food editor. "Would you please help me?" she asked. "I'm cooking a special dinner tonight for my husband's boss and his wife. I've never cooked a big dinner before, and I want everything to be perfect. I bought a nine-pound turkey. Could you tell me how long to cook it in my new microwave?" "Just a minute," the food editor said, as he turned to check his reference book. "Oh, thank you," she said. "You've been a big help. Good bye!" As the Thanksgiving and Christmas season draws closer, many of *us* would like to find a way to prepare a nine-pound turkey - - - in just a minute.

A mental hospital developed an unusual test to determine when their patients were ready to go back into the world. They would bring the patient being considered for release into a room with a sink. When the patient entered the room a faucet over the sink was already on, the sink was overflowing, and water was pouring onto the floor. The patient was handed a mop and asked to clean up the mess. If the patient had enough sense to turn off the faucet before starting to mop up the water, the doctors concluded he was ready to go back into society. But if he started mopping with the water still running, more treatment was needed. Like many of you, I have gotten hooked on the TV show - "The Desperate Housewives." Last week's episode had Gabby crashing a society dinner with her husband Carlos. However, she did not tell her husband that they had been uninvited, so he thought they were sitting in seats reserved for them. When Gabby was away from the table, it was discovered that they were there without an invitation. Carlos was escorted out, and Gabby snuck out through the kitchen and met him outside. When he asked her why she would do something like that, she

said she wanted to be with the Social Elite. Carlos said he was happy because he already had everything he needed - a nice home, a loving wife, and two great daughters. Gabby was trying to Mop up all the water. Carlos was turning off the faucet.

Unlike them, we HAVE been invited to God's Party. But we keep coming up with excuses as to why we can't attend. We need to stop mopping long enough to look up and see if the faucet is still running. We have crowded out God - and without God - life is simply a whirlwind of meaningless activity. We need to center our lives in God's purpose. Then we discover that life truly is a feast. He offers an invitation to His banquet table. But part of the problem is that people don't read the invitation closely enough, and they think the party begins after they die. So they are so busy with things in this life, because they don't realize that God's party is here and now!

A friend of mine told about attending a family reunion many years ago at a local park. Everyone was excited about re-connecting with distant relatives. But as the family settled in for the picnic, they noticed one young man who seemed out of place. He was painfully thin and dressed in threadbare clothes. No one recognized him. Slowly, it dawned on the family that this young man was probably homeless and definitely hungry, and that he had wandered into the family reunion in the hopes of getting a good meal. They decided to make him a member of their family that day. They fed the young stranger platefuls of food, and included him in all their games and activities. And everyone had a great time.

God has welcomed us into his Family Reunion. God was there with his Son - Jesus - and the Holy Spirit. Then WE show up - at the Baptismal Font. We look pretty sad - all dirty with Sin - Hungering for Righteousness - Looking so insecure about our future. God invites us into the Family. Jesus says - "Take and Eat - this is my body. "Take and drink - this is my blood." And the Holy Spirit lets us know that we have been adopted as real family members, not just guests at the Party.

So let's stop with the Excuses already. God is inviting us to enjoy this party called life! Yes, there is an economic crisis, but God's love for us is still as strong as it always was. It really doesn't matter if McCain or Obama gets elected president. God's promise of Salvation is secure for us. God has invited us to a Party. It's called Life! This is the point Paul was trying to get across to the Phillipians, and what God is trying to get across to us.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known by God. And the Peace of God which SURPASSES all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen