

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 28th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 25: 6-10 Psalm 23 Philippians 4: 12-14, 19-20 Matthew 22: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Matthew gives us another parable today and its details can be very confusing, even irritating. It's the parable of the king who has prepared a wedding banquet for his son and is rebuffed by the prime guests. Let's look at its most obvious level, as a story, and enumerate what, at first hearing, speaks to us and also befuddles us. The parable will yield its message if we respect how it is told, who is telling it and why Matthew included it in his gospel.

What an usual way to get guests to come to a wedding! The king sends his servants to "summon" them. Do we summon guests to our family weddings and celebrations? No, but then we are not people in power and rulers of a kingdom. Kings and queens, with absolute power operate, differently than we do. This seems to be the second invitation the king has issued, since those summoned are already the "invited guests." A first announcement has gone out and now these guests would be expecting the call to announce the feast is ready. But they ignore the servants' summons. I know some teenagers who turned down an invitation to a party when they heard who the other guests were. Adults do the same. Is that what happened here? Or, were there other reasons for not going?

Were those on the guest list, the movers and the shakers, making some point to the king? The excuses the invited guests give for not attending are flimsy; they merely return to their workplaces, as if to say, their work was more important than the royal son's wedding. How does one ignore an invitation to a royal wedding? If you don't go because you want to and would be honored to go, you would go because you want to show respect to your ruler. We know what it is like to go to a party just because the boss or a friend has invited us. So, for the king's subjects, it just makes good political sense to go to the wedding. In their negative response to the invitation, the guests are being foolish, arrogant, even insulting.

In Jesus' culture honor was highly prized and to publically embarrass someone was a terrible affront – and, in this case, those rejecting the invitation are insulting their king! Some even mistreat and kill the king's servants; which is equivalent to a direct attack on him. He cannot let this go by without a response, after all he is their

king and has to maintain his position. So, the king orders the recalcitrant subjects killed and burns their city. But now what will he do, after all he has a feast prepared and a son to be married? He just eliminated the guest list.

The king sends out his servants to the “main roads,” which would include the town squares and markets. He “invites” people who would never be on a royal or “respectable” person’s guest list. But those who were first invited, the business people and landowners, had rejected his invitation! Think of those who would now be invited from the “main roads”: pedlars, butchers, beggars, prostitutes, tax collectors, shop lifters, the physically impaired and sick, etc. These people would know a good thing when they heard it; they wouldn’t be so stupid as to refuse.

We know how much time and effort we put into planning weddings; and we are not even royalty. Think of the exquisite food and drink on those tables. How carefully they would have been chosen! Would these newcomers appreciate what was set before them? Would they sip and savor the best wines? Drink them in their proper order? Of course not. They would be hungry and thirsty. In fact, can’t you see them shoving and pushing to get in and grab the best places and the best food and drink? So much for “proper decorum!” In their whole lives they would never have had such a feast and must have thought they never would again, so they were going to dive right in and enjoy themselves; make the most of the moment. Gobble, gobble, drink, drink. “More please!” Do those who are in need know how to celebrate more than those who have too much? If we recognize our need today at Eucharist and realize the gift we have received, we might have more than enough reason to “celebrate Eucharist” together.

The king enters the banquet hall to meet the “guests.” They are no longer merely beggars, street people, foreigners, thieves, etc. They are called “guests.” Their conditions have completely been reversed. And they did nothing to deserve it! They were invited to a feast they, in their wildest imaginations, would never dream they would get to attend. I hear the sound of God’s grace echoing through the banquet hall above the din, raucous behavior, singing and laughing of the “guests.”

Here’s still one more confounding detail in the parable; one we might like to eliminate. The embarrassing element in the parable, as if there haven’t been enough already (!), is the king’s encounter with the man without his “wedding garment.” I want to protest to the king, “But you just had him rounded up from the streets, how can you expect him to be wearing the proper fineries? Where would he get them anyway, aren’t you being fickle and unreasonable?”

There is an option in the Lectionary to end the parable at verse 10, and thus eliminate the seeming-unreasonable detail about the improperly-dressed guest. But sometimes the jarring aspects of these parables yield the most fruit for the hearer. In a religion class for six-year olds, when this parable was read and the teacher asked about the man's lack of a wedding garment, one child offered, "The king wanted his new guests to be properly dressed for the wedding and maybe he offered the wedding garment at the door." Not a bad response, and that is one biblical scholars have also suggested. We are given what we need, once we accept the invitation to the wedding feast. Remember the Cinderella story: the fairy godmother gave her the gown so Cinderella could attend the ball. St. Paul says a similar thing today in our second reading from Philippians, "My God will full supply whatever you need in accord with God's glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

Matthew's community consisted of both Jewish and Gentile converts; quite a mixture for a church in its infancy! Jewish Christians would certainly pick up on the allegorical features in today's parable, for just as the king's servants mistreated and killed the servants sent to invite them to the feast, so were the prophets, who were sent to call the people back to God, mistreated and killed.

Like those from the main roads invited to the feast, Matthew's community must have also had a mixture of the "good and bad" and so the second part of the parable would have challenged them. How were the members changing their lives in response to the invitation to the wedding God had given them? Did they realize the gift they had received? What was their attitude and disposition towards other "guests" in the community. If all are guests, none meriting the invitation but rather brought in by grace, then how could Christians continue to separate and divide themselves according to race, gender, country of origin, language, newcomers and old timers, well dressed and the poor?

If you have read I and II Corinthians, you know the troubles and divisions the community in Corinth had and how much it distressed Paul. At their celebrations were Jewish and Gentile converts, both rich and poor, widows, orphans, the sick and people from "the main roads," who responded to Jesus' embracing message. This diversity must have been hard for some to take, those used to being with their "own kind." But then, there were Paul's strong correctives in his letters and there were parables like today's, to challenge their elitism and call them back to being a community of Jesus' followers.

Someone said recently that a friend couldn't understand how he could be a Catholic, "a religion without the Word and with empty ritual." A rather harsh judgment. But we have refocused since Vatican II and have once again emphasized the importance of hearing and studying scriptures. Scripture opens our eyes to the importance of what we are doing at our celebrations and keeps us from falling into predictable patterns of behavior and former ways of thinking.

If we have raised the Word to its rightful place of dignity and taken today's gospel to heart, then how could we fail to look around at our Eucharist today and celebrate everyone here with us? Let's not judge their motives for coming, or their dress, or how active they are in the parish. Let's celebrate them and the fact that we all are hearers of the Word today. We will do our best to be doers of that Word too! Let God make the call on who is wearing the proper wedding garment.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

Authors: Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher

ISBN: 978-0-7879-9761-8, 256 pages

Publisher: Jossey-Bass, September 2007

<http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787997617.html>

The book takes an in-depth look at the story of the killings and of the forgiveness that became the larger story. The authors are well acquainted with the Amish people and conducted a lot of interviews for the book. They address the faith and theology behind the Amish's ability to forgive so quickly. They look at the Amish culture and history as well as how the community supports the virtue of forgiveness. The main lesson for me is that forgiveness isn't something that one suddenly decides upon when hurt by someone, but is a way of approaching life. In other words, one chooses to forgive well before there is the need to forgive. The Amish give witness to forgiveness not as a word, but as an action.

The authors share Amish insights that forgiveness sometimes can be difficult even for them, for example, many will say that can struggle the most with forgiving another Amish. They put a very human face to the people.

They also address some of the criticisms of the Amish that commentators raised when writing about the tragedy, for example, the Amish practice of shunning. They share other stories of when the Amish forgave people who hurt them. I also noted several quotations, my favorite being of an Amish

farmer who said, "The acid of hate destroys the container."

After reading this book, I will never speak again on forgiveness the same way as in the past.

—sent to us by Dave Mercer, St. Martin Church, Sunnyvale, CA, Diocese of San Jose

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

The king said to his servants... "Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.

The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found,
bad and good alike,
and the hall was filled with guests.

Reflection:

Like those from the main roads invited to the feast, our church is also a mixture of the "bad and good alike" and so the second part of the parable challenges us. How are we changing our lives in response to the invitation to the wedding God has given us? Do we realize the gift we have received? What is our attitude and disposition towards other "guests" in the community? If all are guests, none meriting the invitation, but brought in by grace, then how could we Christians continue to separate and divide ourselves according to race, gender, country of origin, language, newcomers and old timers, well dressed and the poor?

So we ask ourselves:

Do I appreciate the gift I have been given that invites me to this Eucharist today?

How can I welcome others here to celebrate as an invited "guest" to the wedding feast?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

*"The kingdom of heaven may be likened to...
a wedding feast"(Matthew 22:1)*

Weddings are wonderful! Extended families come together. Guests arrive from near and distant places. Friends and relatives rejoice in the love of the bride and groom and in the new small family community the bride and groom have formed together. Everyone dresses up and looks their best. The food is special, the music is an invitation to dance and conversations between new and old friends fill the carefully chosen and beautifully decorated space. It is a joyful time, reflecting months of care and planning. It is such a perfect image of the “kingdom”.

Many young couples struggle to make their wedding plans more like the Gospel “kingdom”. They want their wedding to reflect their own generosity and broad experience of the needs of the world. They know that wedding planning is big business and want to plan an event which truly reflects who they are and does not leave them in debt for years.

The parish resource, *At Home with the Word*, references the ***I Do Foundation***, a non-profit agency which offers couples a variety of ways to share part of their wedding spending with charities.

The ***I Do Foundation's*** mission is to help engaged couples bring a charitable focus to their marriage. It provides a variety of donation options and wedding services to help engaged couples make charitable giving a part of their wedding.

The ***I Do Foundation*** supports many nonprofit organizations that are actively striving to make our communities and society more equitable and just. The ***I Do Foundation*** has made a special commitment to support organizations working for low-income and underserved populations. In addition to its recommended partners, the ***I Do Foundation*** also donates to organizations suggested by couples.

Did you know?

1. The average amount spent on a wedding in 2006 was \$27,852.

The ***I Do Foundation*** was created in 2002 by a group of nonprofit leaders dedicated to developing new avenues of support for charitable organizations. The ***I Do Foundation*** links engaged couples with a host of charitable giving options at their wedding, from its gift registry to invitations and wedding favors.

What I can do:

· If you or someone you know is planning a wedding, let them know about www.IdoFoundation.org. It will help make the wedding a “kingdom” celebration.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

A PRAYER

DISARM ME

**Disarm me, God, of negativity,
of any despair or disbelief lurking
in the corners of my spirit.**

**Take away any resentment or
revenge that prevents holding
all your creatures in reverence.**

**Unarm my weapons of coldness
and silence, melt my steely stance
that keeps me barricaded, locked
in unforgiveness and fear.**

**Tenderize my heart of stone,
soften my gristle, teach me
to walk gently upon this earth.**

by Sr. Barbara Mayer

Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchinson Kan.

(Quoted in, CELEBRATION, October 2008, page 16)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Terry A. Hyatt #0199877 (On death row since 2/7/00)

Cerron T. Hooks #0561692 (2/9/00)

Terry A. Hyatt #0349019 (4/10/00)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"

"**Liturgical year A**," which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"**Liturgical years, A, B and C**," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our

readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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