

“Called AND Chosen”

Matthew 22:1-14

**First Presbyterian Church
November 8, 2020**

Prof. William Willimon tells of a first-year seminary student who came to him saying she would not have her paper in on time, again. “This is really unacceptable,” he told her. “You’re going to be a pastor. Pastors must be punctual. You can’t stand up on Sunday and say, ‘I had hoped to have a sermon for you today, but ...’” You know; life happens. “I agree with you,” she told him. “I have few obvious gifts for ministry. I’m always late. I’m too old. I know I have no business being in seminary. I’ve told God that repeatedly. My being here is God’s idea, not mine,” she said. Upon reflection, Willimon decided she had it about right. We are in ministry – in service to God and God’s world – because we have been called and put here by a God who just loves to make something out of nothing.¹

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus is saying the same thing. God takes us as we are and makes us better than we know ourselves to be. You all know what I’m talking about. The new parent who through faithful persistence learns to nurture and care for a fragile, little baby. The new employee who does what it takes to learn the ropes and help fulfill the corporate mission. And for anyone who has joined a church and been asked to take on a new role. There’s always a learning curve.

Yes, God takes us as we are. But for us to grow into what we could be, we have to work with God along the way. God is ready to do something extraordinary in your life, and he’s eager for your response to his invitation. God is inviting each of us to help build up the Kingdom of Heaven right here on earth. That’s what Jesus is showing us when he says, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a ... wedding banquet.” A wedding banquet is the celebration of something new, a new beginning, and the promise of a joyous life to come.

Take for instance, the elderly gentlemen attending a marriage seminar for husbands. The counselor noted that this man was approaching his 50th wedding anniversary, and asked him to share his secret. The man replied, “Well, I’ve tried to treat her nice, spend money on her. But best of all is, I took her to Italy for our 25th anniversary.” The counselor was impressed, saying, “You are an amazing inspiration to all the husbands here! Please tell us what you are planning for your wife for your 50th anniversary?” The man replied, “I’m going back to Italy to pick her up.”

In the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus tells us the secret to a long and blessed relationship with God. The parable begins with messengers being “sent to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.”

¹ William H. Willimon, Summons to Ministry, Christian Century, February 21, 2001, 7.

So, a second group of messengers was sent. The host tells them, “Go ... into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding” This second group of messengers is seen as the earliest followers of Christ. Many people who got invited to join them in following the Lord “(made) light of it,” noted Jesus. They didn’t even bother showing up. Jesus likens it to a farmer who would rather be working his farm or a business owner who would rather be making a profit.

In other words, some people are too focused on their own agendas. They don’t put any real time or energy into helping to build up the kingdom of heaven, usher in God’s new heaven and new earth.

And then there are still others, says Jesus, who are outright hostile to what God is doing. They tear up God’s invitation and throw it back in his face. Or as Jesus put it, they “seize ... and kill...” the messengers. The others Jesus is talking about here are the Pharisees who were persecuting his followers and plotting his arrest.

So, we’ve got three groups of people here: The Pharisees who reject God’s invitation to follow Jesus, those who say they will follow but something always comes up, and everyone else who are also invited to be a part of God’s plan.

Of course, we don’t want to be like someone who refuses to answer God’s invitation, as if we have something better to do. Or worse yet, someone found actively working against God. There’s got to be another option. And of course, there is. We can be among all those who at least show up when the Lord invites us to join him, whether we feel worthy or not, trusting in God to guide and equip us.

That’s the point in the second part of Jesus’ parable. In the second part of the parable, after the host sends his messengers down Main Street inviting everyone and anyone to the wedding, finally the banquet hall is filled with people. When the host comes in and sees the guests, Jesus tells us, “He noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe.” In other words, someone who showed up, but wasn’t prepared to be a part of what was about to take place, even though the host – which is God – provided the wedding robe – which is what was needed.

Here, Jesus is telling us that everyone is invited and equipped to participate in building up the Kingdom of Heaven in one way or another, and that everyone needs to be prepared to embrace the ministry – the work, the choices and actions – that go with being a follower of the Lord.

After all, the guy who showed up wouldn’t do his part, he got thrown out in the cold. And that’s when Jesus tells us the main point of his parable, saying, “... Many are called, but few are chosen.”

We want to be called and chosen, and for that, it's not enough just to show up. If we expect to be counted among God's "chosen," if we want to receive and enjoy the blessings of God, we have to embrace a life of Christian ministry. We have to be ready to stand alongside others in ushering in a new reality, a reality given voice in the Psalm that Gordon read for us today.

It's a Psalm of sharing in God's glory, rejoicing in the happiness of others, prospering under a system of justice and righteousness, being guided by the Lord, and giving thanks for God's steadfast love and faithfulness. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like – happiness, prosperity, justice, and love for all people.

But it's not just going to happen on its own. We have to recognize what God is doing, appreciate it as a new and blessed reality coming into being, and embrace our role in bringing it about. That's what it is to be called and chosen.

This week, we celebrate military veterans, those men and women who were called and chosen to defend our nation. The past two weeks, we have been deciding on elected officials, those called and chosen to lead our nation. And this month here at church, we are accepting nominations for those called and chosen to lead – and serve – our church.

There are countless ways that each and everyone one of us is called to serve on behalf of the Lord each day. I invite you – I invite all of us – to look at this – not as one more thing we're asked to do – but rather as an invitation from God to be a part of something new, as together we help build up the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

See in us, O God our Father, what you love in your Son. Remind us that our true citizenship is in Heaven, and that it does not rest upon political affiliation and election outcomes, but rather on the sacrifice of the Cross.

Help those who serve our country do so with honor and decency. Guide them in their decision-making that they would be instruments of your blessing and protection over this nation we love.

We thank you, Lord, for the men and women of our military, those serving now and those called to service in years past.

We thank you for those who in your Spirit serve in homes, workplaces, schools, churches and out in the community.

Lord God, we are fully aware that we do not live in a perfect world. Open our eyes to what can be, O God. Let us be a people of faithful action.

May we ourselves be your tools for building up the kingdom of God, a heavenly kingdom of hope and peace, justice and prosperity for all.

We pray, too, for those who need a special measure of hope and peace this day, those dealing with illness, those struggling with heavy burdens, those feeling lost and looking for a way forward.

We pray in the name of the one who showed us the way, who reveals to us what a life of love and faithfulness looks like, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**