

## Philippians 4:1-9

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

<sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

## Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. <sup>4</sup>Again he sent other slaves, 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." <sup>5</sup>But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup>while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. <sup>11</sup> 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup>and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>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." <sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.'

## **The Church Is Not a Commodity**

So Thursday night/Friday morning I lay awake, thinking about this weekend's worship services, the cemetery clean up day, Memorial Sunday, Cranberry Festival, Reboot Worship, Bible studies, Confirmation Class, starting a Stewardship Campaign, and the process of revisioning our church's mission statement, but as all these concerns were spinning in my head, I came to realize that I did not possess that "peace of God which surpasses all understanding." But I also came to realize that what was really keeping me awake was today's Gospel lesson. It's a rather

disturbing passage, isn't it? Okay, we all know Jesus' parables can strain our sensibilities, and the Jesus we meet in the Gospel of Matthew has a serious chip on his shoulder, but this parable takes the cake; A king invites a bunch of folks to a wedding banquet, and they won't come. Now you figure a wedding banquet thrown by a king for his son has got to be a pretty fancy occasion - you wouldn't want to miss it. But everyone turns down the invitation. Then the king sends out more slaves to let folks know just how extravagant the party will be, to tell them what's on the menu - caviar, champagne and lobster - and those invited *still* won't come. What's worse is that they seize the slaves who bring this invitation, beat some of them and kill even more of them! Then things get really ugly. The enraged king sends out soldiers who kill those unobliging guests and burn their city, and while all this havoc is going on the king orders the slaves to go into the smoldering ruins and invite all the survivors to the banquet. Do you suppose anyone turned down the invitation? You need only look around at the smoldering buildings and the corpses of those who turned down the invitation, and you would be dashing to this banquet. Bottom of the ninth inning, Yankees down by two runs with two men on base, you'd turn that TV off and be running to the palace; "Don't want to disappoint *that* king." But what's this? One of the guests forgot to put on his party suit and gets tossed out into the chaos where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now you're checking to make sure your shirt is tucked in and your socks match. And boy, what fun you're having at the banquet. Hope the party never ends, at least that's what you say to this temperamental king lest you too get thrown out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is today's Gospel lesson! I could have wiggled my way out of it, just changed the verse to some "nice" passage about flowers and sheep and "Jesus loves me" stuff, but over the years I've learned the value of **facing the things that bother me**, because avoiding them is only postponing a problem. If someone rubs me the wrong way, and I actively avoid that person, guess what? God is going to put someone even more annoying right in the middle of my path. That's God's sense of humor for you. And the lesson he teaches us is you may as well face the problem now because it's only going to catch up with you later. You can only hide for so long.

And something I've learned from facing the things that bother me is that there's something about me that needs to change. It's not that the people who bother me don't have issues; they may have serious issues, but if I can't be around them the issue becomes *mine*. One reason I'm pastor is that I tend to get along with nearly all people, and that's not the way I've always been; it's a process that takes a long time is oftentimes painful, because it I've had to **prayerfully reflect upon** all the people who rub me the wrong way, who raise my blood pressure, who I might otherwise avoid, and I've had to ask myself, "why?" And what I've discovered is that seeing something in them that I don't like opens my eyes to something in ME that I don't want to see. And my spirit tells me that I must face whatever this is if ever expect to mature spiritually. I must face what I fear, face what bothers me about myself, in order to grow.

And the same rule applies to the Bible; if a passage bothers me, my first impulse may be to run away from it and find something I'm more comfortable with, but someday I'm going to run into that passage again, or passage that bothers me even more, and I must force myself to look at it, to prayerfully reflect upon it, so that I can see something within me that may need to change. If

we don't face passages like today's passage, we deny ourselves an opportunity to grow in knowledge and in faith. So now we're going to look together at this disturbing Gospel passage and discern what it is saying to us, Bethel Church, and hopefully we will be humbled then transformed by the word of God.

This passage from Matthew was to a community in crisis; Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in 70 AD, which was a huge blow to the Jewish faith; if your God resided in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the Romans demolished that Temple, what does that say about your God? And so the Jewish people had to re-define their faith, and there was competition among different denominations as to how to redefine it. The "Christians" were one denomination, and in Matthew's community they were facing extinction because no one was listening to their message; Jesus was resurrected, which signaled the arrival of God's kingdom, which in the parable is the wedding banquet for the Son. The king, who is God, sends out his slaves, who are the followers of Jesus, to invite his people, the leaders of the Jewish people, to the banquet, but the invitation is rejected or ignored. The king sends out more slaves, perhaps the next generation of disciples, to invite the leaders to join the banquet. By this time the invitation is not only rejected but the messengers are beaten or killed – it actually happened that many early disciples were killed at the hands of the leaders. Now the king sends soldiers to kill those invited and to burn the city; Matthew's Jesus is saying that the devastation of Jerusalem is God's wrath against the Pharisees, those who refused the invitation. And now the Gospel message goes out to the Gentiles; those who were outsiders are now invited to the Son's banquet. So the banquet goes on, amidst the smoldering city and the massacre of the unbelievers, but the king kicks out one of the new guests for not donning appropriate attire, which is Matthew's way of saying that gentile converts to the Christian faith should not take their conversion lightly, that there are expectations within the community, and failure to meet those expectations results in expulsion.

There: that's that scholarly understanding of this parable in the light of all the social and historic circumstances surrounding Matthew's faith community. But how does this passage apply to us? Well we could just tell ourselves that those who reject Jesus Christ will pay a heavy price for doing so; this is a common interpretation of this passage, a sort of an "in your face" way of understanding it; "We were right, you were wrong; nanananabooboo." But that's certainly the wrong way to look at this, because all we're doing is edifying ourselves, and scripture is not a tool for us to manipulate to make ourselves feel good. Besides, such an interpretation doesn't address the underdressed guest who was kicked out, and that raises for us a very serious question.

Are we an underdressed church? I don't mean that literally, though there may be a connection between what we wear on the outside and how we feel on the inside. What I mean, more precisely, is ***are we taking God too casually?*** If, as Christians, we consider ourselves to be God's invited guests to the banquet for his Son, how seriously are we taking such an invitation? We may say, "I belong to the church," but are we showing God the appropriate level of appreciation for the invitation? Or do we have a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude toward church? I'll come when *I* feel like coming, and if things don't go my way, *I'll* leave. Do we consider

church to be an opportunity to grow together in Christ, or is it simply a commodity that suits our needs for awhile and can be traded for some other diversion later on? Part of growing in Christ is facing the things in ourselves that make us uncomfortable, things that we usually discover through our interaction with people who rub us the wrong way, and church affords us plenty of opportunity to meet people who rub us the wrong way. Are we seeing that as an opportunity for growth, or are we just going to run to a more comfortable place? Those who don't dress up *spiritually*, who take their faith too lightly may not stick around; I don't anticipate kicking anyone out, but the power of the Holy Spirit which works to transform all of us into the image of Christ may drive away those who are indifferent, those who resist change within themselves, those who have come for a free meal rather than to celebrate the marriage of the king's son.

So how well-dressed are you? You have come to the banquet, but are you thankful for being invited? You come to celebrate, but do you honor the king through your words and deeds? The answer to those questions is shown in your stewardship, the giving of your time, your gifts, your talents, your prayers, and your witness. This is not an appeal for money as I know that many of you don't have any, that your debt exceeds your savings, that your struggling to keep up with the bills; believe me, I understand that. But the gifts you give the church may be the skills and talents that you have – your voice, your labor, your care and concern for others, your smile, your patience. Some people, I fear, misunderstand church altogether; they're waiting to see how well it meets their needs before they're willing to commit anything; they're sampling the champagne to decide whether they'll stay at the banquet or not.

I think this is why this parable startled me on Thursday night. I don't know how many people recognize that a church is a community of disciples committed to one another as they are to Jesus Christ. I don't know how many people understand that being a Christian is an **undeserved honor**. Yes, worship is a celebration, and Holy Communion is a feast, but do we appreciate the price that was paid by the host in order for us to receive such a gracious invitation? Do we approach it reverently, as a sacred privilege that God has granted you and me, as something more valuable than gold or silver or I-phones or resort vacations or luxury cars? Do we look at church as a once-in-a-lifetime privilege that we wouldn't trade for anything else, or are we treating church like a commodity that can be replaced with something else?

I've asked you, over the weeks, to think about and pray about what you believe the mission of a church should be. Now let me offer a caveat; it's not a tool for our own purposes, be they providing a moral education for our children or an opportunity to hold some title on a committee or to simply hang out with really nice folks. It's about honoring the king. It's about appreciating the fact that we are even invited to the celebration, and if we lose sight of those facts we will no longer be a Church. Then the king won't need to expel us from the banquet because we will have already expelled ourselves.

We are privileged to be part of this celebration. Let's not forget why we're here, and who we honor here. Let us not diminish our host by treating him as a commodity, as a means to our own ends. Let's remember where we are, and whose we are, and who invited us. Amen.