



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

GREG SIMON, PREACHER

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – OCTOBER 15, 2017

ISAIAH 25:1-9; PSALM 23; PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9; MATTHEW 22:1-14

PARADISE DAY AFTER DAY

Matthew 22:1-14: *[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 slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 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.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, 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 slaves, ‘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 slaves 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.”]*

My daughter Claire is 27 now, so I think the parental statute of limitations has expired on me telling this story about her. It happened almost 25 years ago, during the winter when she was almost four and our son Zach was one and a half. It was one of those rainy and dark winters to test the fortitude of parents with active young children. By December, it seemed it had been wet and dark forever,

and there were still months to go. Julie and I were feeling a bit desperate. So we started dreaming of escape to Paradise – to Hawaii. After some searching, we found affordable plane tickets and a budget rental condo. And it was the Hawaii we had been dreaming of. The sun was warm, the sand soft, the water refreshing. The kids would run and swim and dig all day. Each evening they'd eat like

wolves and sleep like logs. For parents of active young children, that's about all the Paradise you need.

It was the third or fourth morning in Paradise. At breakfast, Claire asked "What are we going to do today?" Julie and I, feeling like the greatest parents ever, said "We're going to go to the beach." A dark cloud crossed Claire's face and she asked "Do we have to go to the beach day after day after day?" Julie and I both thought "This could turn out to be a long week."

I see that vacation story as a modern version of today's Gospel parable of the wedding banquet. At first reading the parable sounds nothing like an invitation to paradise on earth. There's that poor man called out for having no wedding robe. After being invited to the feast, he's suddenly bound and then banished to the outer darkness, with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Is the point that only the wealthy or well-dressed are invited to God's banquet table? I don't think so.

Those who first heard the parable would have expected everyone to have some sort of wedding robe. By tradition, the host would likely have provided them at the door for anyone in need. The point is not about lacking the right outfit, but about choosing not to put it on. That wedding guest arrived at the celebration and said, like my daughter in Hawaii, "Do I have to come to feast, to celebrate with you, to enjoy this abundance

day after day after day?" In our Gospel story, the wedding robe hangs there unused while the abundant feast is waiting. In my vacation story, it's a size 4 flowered bathing suit hanging forlornly on the balcony railing of the vacation condo, with paradise waiting just outside.

And those who first heard the parable would not think of the darkness as a place God has just created to punish the ungrateful. They would know that darkness is our starting place. It's where we come from. They would know those words from Isaiah, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine." As they listened to the parable, they would hear the contrast between the joyful light of the feast and that outer darkness not a threat, but as a promise and an invitation. In our Gospel story, the sad and fearful darkness is out there. In my modern vacation story, the darkness was inside – in that vacation condo. I think modern darkness, especially sad and fearful darkness, is more often inside. Sometimes deep inside.

Since I am here representing Saint Mark's Stewardship Ministry, you won't be surprised to hear me say that I think the Hawaii vacation story and the Gospel parable of the wedding banquet both describe God's invitation to stewardship, the invitation to open our hearts to abundance and to give generously in response. Every one of us is invited to an abundant feast, to

an actual paradise, to God's Kingdom, day after day after day. Once we join that abundant feast, we will naturally want to give generously. Wearing the wedding robe is how the guest says "Yes" to the wedding feast. Putting on that little bathing suit is how my daughter said "Yes" to the sun and the sand and the ocean. And giving my time and talent and actual money is how I say "Yes" to God's Kingdom here at Saint Mark's.

Fortunately, the vacation story has a happy ending. My daughter didn't pout in the inner darkness for very long. She put on that bathing suit and we all headed out to the beach. The sun was just as warm, the sand just as soft, the water just as refreshing. Day after day after day. And now, almost 25 years later, there's just about nothing she likes more than going to the beach.

Today's parable does not have a happy ending. Instead, it ends in darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. But the whole Gospel story, like my vacation story, certainly has a happy ending. Or, more accurately, the Gospel story really has no ending. God's patient invitation to abundant life is alive and always fresh, day after day after day. Our response may often be clueless or distracted. Even if my first response is "Do I have to?", the invitation keeps coming. Because God is making all things new – is now, has been since the beginning, and always will be.

And the stewardship invitation has the same happy ending. God is making all things new, day after day after day. Even if my first response is "Do I have to?" the invitation to celebrate abundance and give generously will stay open. The abundant life will be there waiting for me, just as dependably as warm weather in Hawaii.

Any of you reading the weekly stewardship message in Sundays and Beyond might ask: "If the invitation is always open, if God's abundant Kingdom is always waiting, then why does it matter if I record my financial commitment this month? Or even this year? The invitation has been from the beginning and always will be. So what's the hurry?"

There is a practical reason to say "Yes" this month. Our vestry would like to know about our financial commitments in time to make a budget for next year. But that's not the real reason to accept the invitation right now.

And the reason for accepting the invitation to abundant life has nothing to do with threat of darkness or banishment to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. God's abundant feast will not just endure, it will continue to break out in new ways – no matter how long it takes me to put on that wedding robe and join the party. That Hawaiian paradise will emerge fresh every morning, day after day after day – no matter how long it takes me to step out into that warm light. God's Kingdom will continue to

break out in new ways here at Saint Mark's whether or not I make a financial pledge this month.

The urgency of the invitation to generous giving- the reason for saying "Yes" right now to the stewardship invitation - goes back to that vacation story. God is making all things new every single morning. The abundant life will be waiting for each of us day after day after day. But my reservation for this rented condo I'm staying in will not last forever. Although I'd usually prefer not to think about it until I have to, my ticket home is already booked. If abundant life in God's kingdom is there waiting for me now, why would I spend even one more day in the dark?

If you have not yet made a financial commitment to give to Saint Mark's in the coming year, I invite you to put on your wedding robe or your size 4 bathing suit or whatever your celebration outfit looks like and join this abundant feast. You won't regret saying "Yes" to this invitation. Once you get to Hawaii, you're going to want to go to the beach. Once you get to the wedding party, you'll want to join the feast. If you have already made a financial commitment for the coming year, then I invite you to just enjoy the abundant celebration and to feel the warm sensations of paradise - right now and then day after day after day.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!