

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 12, 2014

Regrets Only
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October 12, 2014

Matthew 22:1-14

“Regrets only!” What does that mean to the sender of an invitation? It does not mean RSVP. RSVP is an abbreviation for *répondez s’il vous plait*, French for “reply please.” When you are asked to RSVP it means that the sender of the invitation asks that you tell him or her whether or not you can attend. A reply is requested so that the host can plan for the appropriate number of guests.

“Regrets only” means that the host anticipates that you will attend and wants a response only if you are not able to come. It is an insult to the host not to reply if you cannot attend.

Our Gospel message this morning is the third parable which Jesus told in response to the chief priests and elders, the Pharisees, who asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you the authority?” I talked about the first parable, the Parable of the Two Sons, two weeks ago. The second parable, which I have not discussed, is the Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants. I will leave that to some future message. Today’s Gospel message is the conclusion of this attempt by the priests and elders to trap Jesus and is perhaps the strongest of the three parables, the Parable of the Wedding Party. This parable probably was the most offensive of the three to the Pharisees and priests. It is an allegory and would have been unmistakable to them as referring to a messianic feast at the judgment time to come in the future. It was a slap in the face from that pesky rabbi from Nazareth, an insult which undoubtedly made their blood boil.

The Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants was also an allegory of salvation history and its thrust is similar. It can be compared to a sword thrust at the Pharisees and priests and the parable this week pushed the sword home. There is no way that they could have misunderstood the meaning of this week’s parable. The parable really is two parables in one. The first part is the invitation to the wedding feast and the

second part is the host's reaction to a guest who attends without wearing proper wedding attire.

In the first part, the King represents God. The invitations clearly were "regrets only." The King expected everyone who was invited to attend. RSVPs were not asked for, only regrets, and none were expected. Who would ever turn down an invitation from God?

Not only did none of the invitees RSVP, none expressed regrets. Some ignored the invitation and went about their earthly business while others attacked and killed the slaves who brought them the invitation to the banquet. Salvation is being offered and is violently refused.

The meaning of today's parable was unmistakable to the Pharisees and priests. It and other parables refer to past events and to events to come, events which indeed did happen. Those events are Israel's mistreatment of the prophets, Israel's rejection of early Christian missionaries, the destruction of the Temple and the City of Jerusalem, and the movement of the church toward a Gentile constituency.

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written between 80 and 90 AD after all of these events had actually occurred. Luke 14:16-24 tells the same parable much differently. It differs in the responses from the original invitees to the feast but the meaning is the same.

Listen to the parable as expressed in Luke:

¹⁶ *Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'*

¹⁸ *"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'*

¹⁹ *"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'*

²⁰ *"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'*

²¹ *"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'*

²² “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’”

²³ “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.’ ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” (NIV)

Most likely, Luke’s version was written earlier than that of Matthew. It suggests that no one who had been invited earlier came to the feast. When the meal was ready and no one appeared, the slave was sent to find out where they were and, then and only then, excuse after excuse was made. No one had sent regrets when they were originally invited. They ignored the invitation and just didn’t come.

Both versions of the parable however are clearly calling attention to the final judgment. No matter how the parable was actually phrased by Jesus, the message is clear in either version. Luke’s telling is probably the more accurate but the meaning is the same – only those who respond appropriately to God’s invitation, those who send no regrets, will be received into His Kingdom.

When the originally invited guests did not arrive, the banquet was ready, the food had been prepared, and no one came to receive salvation. No one was worthy so the King, God, sent out his servants to bring anyone they could find to the party, good and bad according to the author of Matthew. In Luke, these new guests are described as “*the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame*”, the downtrodden of society in Biblical times. Remember the story of the rich man asking Jesus how he could achieve salvation? He could not accept Jesus’ reply to sell all that he owned and to give it to the poor. The invitation list symbolizes that rich man – the Pharisees and the priests – all those who “Walk the Talk” and who don’t “Talk the Walk” as I defined these two phrases two weeks ago.

The parable is saying that those who espouse self-interest rather than concern for others will not receive salvation.

This is not to say however that the replacement guests will necessarily be admitted to the Kingdom of God. They first must “Talk the Walk.”

The original guests in the allegory were false prophets and false disciples. The new guests, “both bad and good”, are the Gentiles and are others to whom the church

reaches out – the poor, the downtrodden, the sinners and tax collectors – those who were rejected by the Jews --- those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans and the Temple was no more. The City had been utterly devastated. *“Disaster”, according to William Barclay, “had come to those who refused to recognize the Son of God.”* The new wedding guests were the Christians.

According to Barclay, *“The invitation of God is to a feast as joyous as a wedding feast. His invitation is to joy ... It is to joy that the Christian is invited; and it is joy he misses, if he refuses the invitation.”* The Pharisees and elders had refused the invitation. They had missed out on a joyful occasion.

Barclay also says, *“The tragedy of life is that it is often the second bests which shut out the bests, that it is things which are good in themselves which shut out the things that are supreme ... A man ... can be so busy with the organization of life that he forgets life itself.”*

The Parable of the Wedding Feast provides a gracious invitation to all, good and bad, to accept the grace offered by God. Grace is what is referred to in the second part of the parable, verses 11-14, about the wedding garment.

Peterson’s Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, states those few verses thusly:

“When the king entered and looked over the scene, he spotted a man who wasn’t properly dressed. He said to him, ‘Friend, how do you dare come in here looking like that!’ The man was speechless. Then the king told his servants, “Get him out of here – fast. Tie him up and ship him to hell. And make sure that he doesn’t get back in.’

Many get invited; only a few make it.”

God’s gracious invitation has been extended to everyone but proper wedding attire is expected. We must be clothed in the grace of Christ.

According to Fred Craddock and others:

“Matthew knew how easily grace can melt into permissiveness; he knew that for those who presume upon grace, forgiveness does not fulfill righteousness but negates it. Matthew apparently is addressing a church that had lost the distinction between accepting all persons and condoning all behavior. Those who tend to wallow in grace, to

sever sanctification from justification, may be startled by the king's question, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'"

All of us have been invited to the wedding party. Will we all accept the invitation or will some of us ignore it? Will all of us put on a wedding robe and accept the grace offered to us by Christ?

Amen!