

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Children of God: Personal Responsibility”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 28:10-22

Matthew 22:1-14

It was the only doctor’s visit I hated as a child...and no, it was not going to the pediatrician to get shots. It was going to the Ophthalmologist. I was one of those kids that got glasses very, very early in life. And once a year we went to get me new glasses. I am not sure why my parents chose the Ophthalmologist they chose, but I hated, because we always had to wait...and wait...and wait. If our appointment was at 2pm, we would not be seen until 4pm and we would not leave until 5pm. And even though my mother knew this, we would always be on time, so we could wait. The only salvation I found was a children’s magazine called Highlights. It had all sorts of games and puzzles that kept me busy until my eyes were dilated. One of my favorite games was, “What is Wrong with this Picture?” It was loaded with all sorts of funny things that ought not to have been there; chickens flying helicopters, giant vegetables and dogs walking people. The reason I offer this story is because as soon as I read our morning’s Jesus’ story...all I could think of was what’s wrong with this picture.

So let’s take a moment and go through Jesus’ parable this morning and look at the things that just seem to be wrong. First there are people who, when invited to a great wedding banquet for the prince of the land, refuse to come. This is not a smart move. It is not good to bite the hands that feed you. Next, those same people who refused to come to the banquet decide that not only will they refuse to go, but they will seize the king’s slaves and abuse them. This is even a worse idea. The King, being a bit ticked off, sends out his army to destroy the people and burn their city...all the while the food for the wedding banquet is on the table. I can just see him telling the queen, “But Dear, the Army will be right back and then we can eat.” Next the King decides to invite everyone else to the party, good or bad, it does not matter. This is not something that kings generally do. Finally, there is some poor fellow who after being invited to the party, forgets to wear the right clothes and is tied up and thrown out in the darkness. There would seem to be a lot wrong with this story.

However, before we chuck this story, perhaps we need to take a moment and ask ourselves what it right with it, for remember, Jesus is telling this strange story to make a couple of points, two of which we will lift up. First, Jesus wants the people to know that God invites everyone to the party. In the beginning of Jesus’ ministry the only people he invited to the party were God’s chosen people, the children of Israel. In fact probably ninety-five percent of his ministry was focused on them; thus the reference to those who had been invited. After many of them refused to come, Jesus invited everyone else, all of us, to the party. And it did not matter to whom we were related, whether we were good or bad, or anything else. Jesus sent his disciples all across the world inviting people to the party. And in so doing the message was, come as you are, because Jesus welcomes you just as you are, no questions asked. This is an amazing act of love.

Second, however, Jesus does not want us to stay as we are. Let me repeat that even though Jesus welcomes us as we are, he does not want us to stay as we are. This is the point Jesus is making with that last strange part of the story about the man without the wedding garment being tied up and tossed out. While this may seem a bit unfair, it was a warning to those people who followed Jesus that what was expected of them was change. I say this because the wedding garment represented the very act of putting on Christ. In the early church when someone was baptized, they literally took off their old clothes and put on a new white robe. When they did so, they committed themselves to

becoming new people whose lives were to more and more resemble that of Jesus. In other words, they took personal responsibility to intentionally seek to follow Christ in all aspects of their lives. I realize that we Presbyterians baptize children...who obviously cannot make that personal choice. But we do so first believing that we are claiming our children on God's behalf. Second, we do so because we make the parents take the personal responsibility for helping to shape their children's Christ-like character.

Now, before I close I want to make it clear what I am not saying, because sometimes it is as important to know what I am not saying as it is to know what I am saying. First, what I am not saying is that there is some perfection-bar above which we must rise in our lives in order to stay at the party. In other words it was like when I was in the Peace Corps and I decided to take the Foreign Service Exam. I went to the United States Embassy and waited with all the other test takers. As we waited I could overhear the conversations about how most of these people were temporary Department of State employees and unless they passed the exam they would lose their jobs. This is not what Jesus is saying. What matters is the effort. What matters is that we take a sense of personal responsibility for our lives in Jesus Christ. What matters is that we consciously put on the wedding garment and do our best to live as one who follows Jesus. Second, what I am not saying is that we do this alone. Not only do we strive to follow Christ in the midst of a church family, but we do so with God's assistance. Just as God came to Jacob and reaffirmed the covenant promises to him, God is present at the party as we strive to live into our faith.

With all of that in mind, I want to ask you all to do something this morning. I would like to ask you to once again intentionally put on the garment...and this is how we are going to do this. I am going to ask you the questions I asked Toby and Savannah, in order that you renew your own baptismal vows, which are by the way, the questions we ask of all new members. Here they are:

1. Trusting the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Do you?
2. Do you turn again to Jesus Christ and reaffirm him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? Do you?
3. Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love? Will you?

The challenge then for all of us here this morning is to take personal responsibility for following through on these vows. The question then that I would have you ask yourselves this week is this, "How am I intentionally living into these vows I have this day reaffirmed?"