

Rector's Stewardship Sermon
"Oh, What A Banquet of Joy!"
Sunday, October 9, 2011
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Proper 23 Year A: Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus said, "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."

In this parable we hear that a wedding dinner for a King's son was cooked and ready to be served. The prime ribs of oxen and the crown roasts from the fatted calves were fragrant and juicy. The green salad was crisp, ready to be tossed with raspberry vinaigrette. The green beans were cooked to al dente perfection and the oven-roasted, red skinned potatoes with rosemary, garlic and olive oil, exquisitely browned and fragrant.

Yet when the king's servants inform the invited guests that dinner is ready to be served, instead of making haste to dine at this luxurious feast, what happens? People don't show up. They make light of the invitation and turn their noses down at the sumptuous meal ready for their dining pleasure. Instead they go about their business.

Clearly this was not a group of Christ Church folks being called to eat! No one in this congregation is ever late for a meal!

These folks are different. When the king's servants call the invited guests to the table a second time they get testy and abuse the messengers to the point of death. Understandably the king becomes enraged and he wages war on the dinner guests. Granted this is a bit of an over-reaction, but then again have you ever invited people to dinner and had them be no-shows? Irritating, isn't it?

In the mean time the sumptuous dinner waits and waits and waits to be eaten as all this drama takes place.

One thing is for sure; if you had wanted a nice medium rare piece of prime rib you were definitely out of luck after it has been sitting around in a warmer oven all that time! Of course, Jesus' parables are not to be taken literally. Parables contain far greater meaning than what the surface story presents. They are multi-faceted stories conveying

the truths of God's Kingdom. The reality is that there was no literal wedding or banquet or war. Yet all of those things have meaning as Jesus tells what God's Kingdom is like. So what truths does this parable offer us today as we kick-off our annual parish Stewardship Campaign?

"Stewardship, you say? Ah, yes, it is that time of year again, isn't it," you're thinking. Okay, let's be honest, stewardship campaigns are dreaded by most people in the pews. While the intent of stewardship campaigns is to remind us of the good gifts of time, talent and treasure God has given us, and the scriptural imperative to give back a portion of those gifts to God, vis-à-vis the church, what people invariably perceive is that these campaigns are really only about money. As one person indelicately once told me, this is the time of year when the church, "tries to get its hands into my wallet." People don't like talking about their money – especially giving it – and they don't much like talking about giving of their time and talents either.

Let me share a little secret with you; clergy and lay leaders don't much like stewardship campaigns either, at least not the way they are normally conducted. Think about it. What methods do we invariably employ to get people to support the life and ministries of their church?

Well, there are the rector's stewardship jokes to put people at ease. Sometimes there is a bit of high drama to catch your attention. And then there's always some cajoling and guilt about all the money you spend weekly at Starbucks, McDonald's or fill in the blank with your favorite way to spend discretionary income, versus the amount you give to the church. There's the sentimental approach talking about the baptisms, weddings, funerals, Christmas pageants, etc. that you and your family have had here. Sometimes there are thinly veiled threats and intimidations about how we will have to fire your favorite staff person, eliminate a program you love, only have a ½ time priest or not turn the heat up above 55 degrees in the winter. Oh, yes, then there's the begging, pleading and even a dash of fear about the wellbeing of your eternal soul if you are not a cheerful giver thrown in for good measure. And finally there is the use of scripture and the Biblical imperative to give generously.

Of all these tactics used to make the argument to engage in good stewardship, the only legitimate one is scriptural. The rest of it just ends up being manipulative. It makes those entrusted with promoting stewardship resemble a carnival barker trying to sell a bill of goods. Frankly, this approach to stewardship is not only inappropriate in a Christian faith community it is embarrassing; embarrassing for the clergy and parish leadership to have to engage in it and embarrassing for you to hear and endure it. I will no longer engage in this approach to stewardship. Well, I may tell a joke now and then, but not the rest of it. I will not do so for the aforementioned reason, but also because there is no need to convince you of what you already know about stewardship

and your faith life. And what we already know are the truths embedded in today's parable of the Wedding Banquet.

First truth: we are – each and every one of us – invited to the wedding banquet that God prepares for us. It is a feast of joy that God invites us too. This feast of joy is something the world cannot provide, it only exists in the gathered community of faith and the presence of the Spirit within it. Because this feast can only be dined on in the gathered community it means you need to be present; you need to accept the invitation. And the feast can only be truly joyful when all who are present give of themselves fully. So when we Christians view stewardship as some sort of dreaded, gloomy, discomfoting event that we do not want to participate in or at best begrudgingly give only a token of our time, talent and money too, we fail to authentically participate in the life of the community. To make that choice becomes a refusal of God's invitation to come and dine at the feast.

The second truth in the parable is revealed in the actions of those guests who disregarded the invitation to the feast but rather went off to do other things. We all can get so busy with the things of life that we forget to tend to those things critical to our spiritual health and happiness. And our spiritual health and happiness requires our being at the feast. Too often we believe that the most important work we do is to respond to the insistent claims the world makes on us above all else. In so doing God's invitation to the feast of joy gets ignored. The parable reminds us that when we get so caught up, stressed and busy with the things of the world, we end up failing to have the life of joy God invites us to.

The third truth in this parable is seen in the actions of the man who shows up at the wedding banquet and is feasting away having a grand old time. His problem is that he is not wearing a wedding robe. The robe is symbolic of what we bring to the feast of joy. The robe represents the appropriate giving of our time, talent and money back to God; it is our wedding gift. The king gets angry with the man because his not being robed is disrespectful of him and his generosity as well as of those guests who have faithfully put on the robe of giving back generously to God.

The man being ejected from the feast by the king for not wearing the wedding robe reminds us that we can't expect our parish to provide us with all those services we want from our church without our giving of our own resources to help provide them. We can't expect to feast on the worship, music, Christian formation, pastoral care, concerts, outreach and ministries on the banquet table without our generous financial support as well as giving generously of our time and talent.

As the parable reminds us there are dire consequences in accepting the invitation to the feast and then doing nothing but eating the great food.

It is said that the way in which we come to something indicates the spirit in which we come.

I invite you to prayerfully discern the spirit in which you come to the wedding banquet offered at Christ Church.

Reflect on God's invitation to you to dine at the wedding feast offered here at this parish. Will you accept it fully, ignore it or just eat your fill but not bring anything to the party?

The banquet is well laden in this community. You are, each and every one of you, without exception, invited to feast on its abundance. The menu offered here is not the ersatz food of the world but the true bread that gives life. And the best part is you get to design your own wedding robe, as you bring your gifts to God. Oh, and by the way, let me share one more little secret with you: when you wear that robe it will make you beautiful inside and out.

Oh, what a banquet of joy that is going to be!

Amen.