

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23A) October 9, 2011  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

### Will you come to the feast?

Jesus' parable of the wedding feast has been interpreted in all kinds of ways, some of them helpful, some of them -- not so much. Over the years, commentators have read the parable as an angry rebuke of the Jewish religious authorities who rejected Jesus; as an allegory to justify the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman soldiers in the year 70 C.E.; and as an account of why the early Christian communities opened their doors to Gentiles as well as Jews. At their worst, interpretations of the parable can smack of conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism; at their best -- well, that is what I'd like to explore with you this morning. What meaning *can* this parable have for us today? In particular, what can it tell us about our interior experiences of God, and what spiritual guidance can it give?

Let's take it from the top. Once upon a time there was a king -- a wise and all-powerful king who decided to hold a wedding banquet for his son. He got everything ready and prepared a feast of the finest foods. He sent out invitations to his chosen guests, saying "Everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet" (Matthew 22:4). But the guests would not come. Twice they were asked, and twice they turned him down. They "made light" of the invitation, the story tells us, and some "went away, one to his farm, another to his business" (Matthew 22:5), while the rest attacked and killed the messengers.

When we read this through the lens of spiritual experience, what might this part of the story mean? I think at once of all the times that I refuse those invitations to the feast. Too often I act like one of those guests who is handed a beautiful, hand-engraved wedding invitation and I cross my arms and say "No thanks; not interested." Has this ever happened to you? Maybe you're sitting inside, and you've been inside all day, getting some work done, and you look up and notice that the sun is now low in the sky, casting a marvelous golden light across the purple underbelly of the clouds, and some part of you stares and says Oh! And you want to get up and gaze out the window for a while. But you don't.

Or maybe there's a man with a loose gray coat and an unshaven face who is standing on the sidewalk where you just parked your car, and as you put a quarter

in the meter, he mumbles a request: could you give him money to buy a cup of coffee? You look across the street and sure enough, there's a coffee shop right there; even if you don't want to give the man cash, you could perfectly well walk across the street and get him a cup of coffee. But you don't.

Or maybe you feel distracted and harassed, or maybe depressed and discouraged, and you sense a deep tug to prayer. You know that new life would blossom in you if only you could get yourself to sit down for a while and pay attention to what is going on inside, if only you could just let yourself rest for a while in God's embrace. You know that this is what you really want and need, but do you let yourself pause to take in that nourishment? You don't. You've got other things to do -- good things, important things. That inner tug can wait. If you ignore it long enough, maybe it will go away.

Invitations to love's banquet can take many forms, and they come not just once, but every day, and many times a day -- maybe as an invitation to gaze at the beauty of the world, or as an invitation to be generous, or as an invitation to pause for while to give the lover of our souls our full and undivided attention in prayer. Yet how easy it is to say no! I have a million excuses -- I'm too busy, too focused on my own agenda, too scattered or overloaded to relinquish my worried, busy mind, to let my awareness open, and to drop down to my heart.

And that's a loss, because deep at the center of our being is an unquenchable thirst for union with the divine. Deep in our guts, our bones, our very DNA, is an irrepressible yearning to move toward the Source of life, the All, the Ultimate, the Holy One. Call it what you will -- human beings the world over, whatever their religion, share a desire for what one writer calls "the union on this earth and in this body of the human with the divine. This is the true spiritual marriage, the consummation of love that in one way or another is the aim of every ritual and every practice in every religion."<sup>1</sup>

It's no wonder that the Bible so often uses wedding imagery as a way to express the complete and intimate union of God and God's people, or of God and the individual soul. Sometimes the Bible depicts the bridegroom as God; sometimes the bridegroom is Christ. Sometimes, as in this parable, we are invited to be guests at the wedding, and sometimes we ourselves are the bridegroom, we ourselves are the bride.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Housden, *For Lovers of God Everywhere: Poems of the Christian Mystics*, New York City: Hay House, Inc., 2009, p. xiii.

Love poets and mystics know all about the ecstasy of spiritual marriage. Take, for instance, St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we celebrated a few days ago. Francis gazed deeply into the natural world as if into a mirror, and saw reflected back to him the outpouring love of God. For him, God was not an entity “out there” -- God was within him and around him; God infused and sustained and shone out from all things. Here is a little something that St. Francis wrote:<sup>2</sup>

*Such love does  
the sky now pour,  
that whenever I stand in a field,*

*I have to wring out the light  
when I get  
home.*

The human longing for union with God is universal, but how quickly we repress it, ignore it, or push it away! Who knows why? Maybe we don't want to feel our need and vulnerability; maybe we're afraid to relinquish control; maybe we're convinced we're not good enough, we can't possibly be loved that much. But if we keep pushing God away, if we keep shutting ourselves off from the invitation to love and to be loved, then before long we will start to experience God as the enemy, and that's the next part of the parable: some guests mock the messengers and blow them off, and other guests seize, mistreat, and kill them. The text tells us that “the king was enraged” (Matthew 22:7). He sends in his troops, destroys the murderers, and burns their city down.

As a spiritual story, this parable is quite accurate and exact: when we turn ourselves into the enemy of God, eventually we begin to experience God as an enemy. God has not changed, but we have -- we have pushed God away, and deliberately alienated ourselves from the divine. Before any spiritual union can possibly take place, maybe that stubborn, resisting part of the self needs to be brought low and to fall away, like a city set on fire. All of us who at some point have made a mess of our lives, who have made terrible mistakes and headed too far

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<sup>2</sup> St. Francis of Assisi, “Wring Out My Clothes,” in *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, New York, Penguin Compass, 2002, p. 48

down a willful, self-centered, and defiant path, know what it is like to find ourselves sitting in the ruins of a smoldering city. Sometimes the ego must be crucified before the soul can be born.

Yet the invitation to love never ceases. In fact, it gets wider than ever, deeper and more expansive, more inclusive. There is no guest list now. The king's love reaches out to everyone. The wedding is ready, he says; the feast is about to be served and the food is hot. He sends messengers into the streets to invite everyone to come, both good and bad, and they stream into the wedding hall until it is filled at last.

If you read this as a story of the interior life, it seems that only now -- after our pride and defiance have been humbled and brought low -- only now can we understand that every part of ourselves is being invited to the feast, that everything in us that we have cast away, abandoned, and rejected is being invited into the presence of God to be welcomed and healed and made whole. Our whole selves are invited to the feast, and everybody is invited with us. There is no need now to shrug hopelessly and to say that we have to settle for being alienated from each other, that we have keep living driven, restless, distracted lives, that we have to make peace with poverty or economic injustice, that we have to condone destroying the earth, or that we have to tolerate an endless succession of wars -- we have been invited to feast at the table of divine life. We have been invited into the very heart of God, and in the strength of that divine presence we are sent out into the world to bear witness to God's justice and mercy and love.

The parable ends with the startling little story of the guest who comes to the feast without a wedding robe and who is summarily bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness (Matthew 22:11-14). I hear this as a reminder to stay humble: God loves us completely, and invites everyone to the feast, but we have our own work to do: to clothe ourselves day by day with the intention to love. As we hear in Colossians, our job is to "[strip] off the old self with its practices and [to clothe ourselves] with the new self..." The passage continues: "As God's chosen ones... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and...forgive each other... Above all, clothe yourselves with love" (Colossians 3:9-10, 12-14). In short, we wear the right clothes to the wedding feast of life when we clothe ourselves with love.

In two weeks I turn sixty, and at this decisive juncture, here is what I want to tell you. When love's holy invitation comes, I want to say yes. When love calls me to marvel at the sunset, to stop and gape at the beauty of the world, I want to say yes. When love calls me to walk across the street to bring someone a cup of

hot coffee and to add some honey to it, and some milk, as well, because that's the way he says he likes it, I want to say yes. When the divine call comes to sit down in prayer and to give the lover of my soul my full and undivided attention, I want to say yes. As Mary Oliver writes in her poem, "When Death Comes,"<sup>3</sup>

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life*

*I was a bride married to amazement.*

*I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

I want to say yes to life, yes to God, yes to the dear one in whose invisible, irresistible presence we step fully into life, daring to connect deeply with ourselves and each other, refusing to be spectators, refusing to hold back, stepping out to create a world in which everyone has a chance to experience how deeply he or she is loved by God.

Here's another poem<sup>4</sup> about the marriage between God and the soul, written by Anna Swir, a poet from Poland. I don't know whether or not she was married, but I do know that the "dear one" to whom she refers in this poem might well be God. Here goes:

*She is sixty. She lives the greatest love of her life.*

*She walks arm-in-arm with her dear one,*

*her hair streams in the wind. Her dear one says,*

*"You have hair like pearls."*

*Her children say:*

*"Old fool."*

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Swir, "The Greatest Love," translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan, in *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, edited by Roger Housden, New York: Harmony Books, p. 43.

A fool for Christ? You bet. That's who we are, if we're lucky: a bride married to amazement, a bridegroom taking the world into our arms. Will you come and follow me, Jesus asks us every day -- in fact, in every moment. Will you come to the banquet table and take in my presence with the bread and wine? Will you let my love shine out in your life?

I will give the last word to Rumi, a Sufi poet who ends one of his poems like this:<sup>5</sup>

*On a day when the wind is perfect,  
the sail just needs to open  
and the love starts.*

*Today is such a day.*

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<sup>5</sup> Jalaludin Rumi, "On a Day When the Wind is Perfect," in *Love Poems from God*, op. cit., p. 80.