

Trinity 20 (2023)

The day after my mother died, I found in a trunk in her bedroom a copy of *The Progressive Farmer* magazine dated the month of my birth. Maybe she had put it away for that reason.

The *Progressive Farmer*, at least in those days, contained more than articles on how to increase your yield of cotton and soybeans. It had something for every member of the family, from the farm wife to farm children.

What caught my eye as I pulled the December 1956 issue out of the trunk, amid the pungent odor of moth balls, was the picture on the cover. It was of a stately country house, complete with portico and white columns.

A wreath was hung on the door, and people were arriving for Christmas dinner, men with coats and ties, women wearing dresses, children in their Sunday best.

Over in the magazine there was another picture. It was of the same group seated around a dining room table. Each place was set with the best china and silverware. The Christmas turkey was there, along with all the trimmings.

It brought back memories. There is something about doing things in a formal manner that makes them special. We don't see that much anymore, and it is sad.

Now I am going to ask you to use your imagination. Picture 30 or so minutes before this dinner was to begin, the guests one by one ringing up and making such excuses as:

“There is a football game on television this afternoon, and we want to watch it. So, we've decided to stay home. Sorry. Too busy.”

“Our dog is getting ready to have puppies. Just in case she goes into labor, we're keeping close to home. Hope you understand.”

“The children want to play with their new toys. Please have us excused.”

Unthinkable? /// Unthinkable or not, this is what we find the guests doing in the parable Jesus tells in today’s New Testament reading.

The difference is that this was no ordinary family dinner. It was a royal affair; a king was giving a wedding party for his son. That being the case – at least in olden times – there may well have been consequences for not showing up . . . and there were in Jesus’ parable.

So, what is this parable about? Is it just about some rude people who failed to show up at a party?

No, it is directed at the Jewish religious leaders present that day. They are the ones spurning the King’s invitation and facing certain calamity, along with all of Jerusalem.

The party is the messianic banquet, that great feast that was to take place when Yahweh showed up in the person of the Messiah. Seven hundred years earlier Isaiah had spoken of it:

“And in this mountain [Jerusalem] shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.”

“Lees,” by the way, refers to the dregs at the bottom of the vessel used in making or storing wine. “Wines on the lees” is what rises to the top, the best wine.

So, the feast envisioned by Isaiah and being announced by Jesus was a feast of the best. In this way, it was like the Christmas feast laid out on the table pictured in *The Progressive Farmer* magazine, only better.

Moreover, the invitation to this party was by invitation only. It was for God's covenant people.

Every Jew wanted to be present at this great feast, at least that is what they said with their lips. But, if you look back over their history, another story is told.

Time after time they – especially their leaders -- had acted very rudely to those sent by God to get them ready for this event, namely the prophets. Some they had ridiculed. Others they had shut up in prison. Still others they had killed.

Now the religious leaders in Jesus' own day were going down the same road as their forebearers. They were plotting to kill the one God had sent. The only thing being different was Jesus was more than a prophet. He was God's Son.

This parable paints a picture of calamity for them and Jerusalem.

Their place at the Messianic banquet will be taken by others, people they consider ‘nobodies’.

People from the east and the west will come and share in this meal, including the gentiles.

John in the Prologue to his Gospel speaks of this great reversal of fortune when he writes:

“He [Jesus] came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.”

So that is the message of the main portion of this parable. Unbelief and rejection of Jesus brings loss and judgment.

But what about the man at the end that goes to the banquet without a wedding garment? Whom does He represent?

I think it is fair to say he represents those Jews who were relying on their own righteousness, their own law-keeping, to get them a seat at this event. They are the self-righteous who think they need no repentance.

Well, that is a thumbnail view of this parable's original context, but how might it apply to us in the 21st century?

Let's begin with some Good News. Straight off we learn that the door into God's eternal kingdom has been opened to all, to all who give the allegiance to Jesus. There is a card at the table with your name and mine. Good news.

More than that, we learn from it that Christianity is not a joyless, pleasure-denying religion. Jesus summons us to feast, not a wake!

William Barclay, the Scottish bible commentator of the last century, writes helpfully:

“To think of Christianity as a gloomy giving up of everything which brings laughter and sunshine and happy fellowship is to mistake its whole nature. It is to Joy that the Christian is invited; and it is joy he misses, if he refuses the invitation.”

Christianity does beckon us to die. . . to die to one way of thinking and doing, to make sacrifices, to spend and be spend in the service of others. Yet, beyond the darkness of Good Friday comes the blaze of Easter.

Because of Easter we can live free . . . free from the fear of death, free from a life of purposelessness, free to enjoy all that is winsome and wonderful in this present world.

All that is true, honorable and lovely in this present age points forward to something better in the age to come.

Christianity is a creation-affirming religion. This is my Father's world, as we have just sung.

But there is also a more somber message found in this parable. It is possible to miss the party. What we do in this life, in particular what we do with Jesus, counts.

The responses people give to the call of the Gospel can be summarized under three headings.

The first is **Light-hearted Indifference**. Some in the parable Jesus told made light of King's invitation. They were too busy to break away.

Isn't that the way it is with many in our world today. This world is too much with them.

They fail to see that we live in a rented field and that the stuff we amass and hold onto will one day end up in an estate sale or a dumpster. Their approach to life is wholly this-worldly.

Stuff needs to be put in its proper place. Use it, enjoy it, but don't make a god out of it. Seek first the kingdom of God.

A second response is **Active Opposition**. In verse 6, we read: **“The rest seized the king’s servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.”**

Murderous hate is still very much with us. We’ve seen it recently in those seeking to destroy the Jews in the Middle East. And, in many places throughout the world we see the same hate directed at Christians.

According to an article in *Christianity Today*,

--Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith.

--Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.

--And every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another five are abducted.

And, of course, there are those in our own country who are openly hostile to the Gospel. Recently a parent in Florida became angry with the local school board for allowing the Gideons to give her child a Bible. What kind of parent is that?

So far, we have look at two responses to the Gospel -- Lighthearted Indifference and Active Opposition. But there is third, **Grateful Acceptance**.

In the end, the King's banqueting chamber was filled with people of all sorts. We too can be among that number.

It doesn't matter how checkered your past. It doesn't matter how much money is in your bank account, who your granddaddy was or is, your level of education or mental capacity. There's room for you.

Jesus has opened the way. He has paid the price of sin, taken the penalty you and I deserve so we can go free, put up a "Welcome all" sign above the door of heaven. Very good news indeed

In closing and as a reminder of God's promised future blessings, why not at the end of every family celebration hold up your fork and say: "Save it, the best is yet to come!"

That, my brothers and sisters, is what I hope you will take away from this parable this morning.