

At the Table in the Kingdom of God

Matthew 22:1-14

Our text today begins at a wedding banquet. Most of you here know that weddings are something I have some recent experience with. Just nine weeks ago Jana and I stood before God and our family and friends and took our vows. Perhaps the best part of weddings is the gathering of family and friends. People who have helped shape your life come to share in a joyous occasion. At our wedding I think of Pat and Terry Gruniger, friends of my family who have known my mother and father for over 30 years. They came all the way from Texas to be there. You could say they watched me grow up. I suspect they came mainly because Terry wanted my new bride to know that I when I was three years old I clogged up his plumbing by flushing one of my GI Joe's down his toilet. There were other people I remember as well. Several people from Candler Park Baptist Church, the last church I served at, came to watch Jana and I get married and to watch their former pastor perform our ceremony. Before the wedding Jana reunited with one of her old friends from high school, Sharon, who she hadn't spoken to in years, and Sharon ended up being one of the bridesmaids. Jana and I were also very flattered that many members of this congregation made it to the wedding despite us being so new to you. Jill our last pastor was there, Elise was there, Tim, Glenna and Hayden Reeves were there. I can't tell you what a tension breaker it was for me during those nervous moments at the front of the church waiting for Jana to come down, to see young Hayden sitting between her parents bouncing back and forth. I could also mention Patrick and Megan Devane. Patrick stayed with me through my nervous hours leading up to the wedding as I paced my apartment.

Megan stayed with Jana all morning in much the same way, basically serving as a bodyguard and assistant to Jana, handling minor incidents and keeping people out of Jana's face so she could relax and enjoy her day. All these people and countless more were there as well as our families, sharing in our special day. Jana can tell you that throughout all of the wedding planning my only request was that our family and friends have a good time. And after the ceremony and a reception filled with dancing, food, laughter, hugs and kisses, we accomplished that goal. Jana and I had a wonderful wedding, and sharing that day with family and friends is a huge part of what made it so special.

But then I put Jana and I in the place of our text today. What would it have been like if no one had shown up? What would our day have been like if the Grunigers weren't there? If the people of Candler Park hadn't been there? If Sharon hadn't been there? If people from this congregation hadn't been there? If Patrick and Megan hadn't been there? How would I have felt if there had been no groomsmen with me in the tense moments before the ceremony began? What if when I stood up at the front of the church waiting for Jana to join me, I had looked over nothing but empty pews? So we get on the phone and remind everyone that the ceremony will be short and the reception has free food and an open bar, but still no one shows up. All of our supposed friends had lame excuses, "couldn't get off work, couldn't find a baby sitter, it's too far to travel, too much homework, ect..." So Jana and I finally just open up the doors of the church we had our wedding in and let it be know to all passers by that there is a wedding here with food and dancing to follow. The house is packed, with everyone there grateful for an unexpected blessing of food and celebration.

Our text today is of course a parable, Jesus' favorite method of teaching. The parable of the wedding feast comes in the middle of a discourse Jesus is having with some Pharisees at the temple. The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus and are challenging his authority, so Jesus is telling stories. He begins with the story of two brothers. Both are instructed to go work in their father's field. One says he will go and does not go while the other initially says he will not go but then changes his mind and goes. Which one, Jesus asks, actually does the will of the father? Next comes the parable of the wicked tenants. A landowner leased his vineyard to tenants. When the owner sent his slaves to collect his harvest from the tenants, the tenants kill the slaves. The landowner sends more slaves, who are met with the same result. Finally the landowner sends his son, and the tenants beat and kill him as well. The Pharisees are no dummies, and they know Jesus is talking about them. So Jesus tells one more parable to truly drive his point home.

The ruler in our story of course represents God. God prepares for all of Israel the messianic banquet that all of Israel, especially the pious Pharisees, claim to want. But when God sends his messengers to tell his guests that the party is ready, no one shows up. The messengers of the ruler in our parable represent the prophets that have come to Israel throughout her history, calling everyone to a life at the messianic banquet, but of course Israel rejects the prophets. They have better things to do, like the building of a golden calf mentioned in our Old Testament reading for today. Our text tells us that the response of the wedding guests enrages the king, and the king sends out his army to slaughter everyone who was invited but did not come. Unlike our Old Testament reading, there is no Moses to appeal for mercy on behalf of those who have rejected the

ruler for more immediate concerns. Many biblical scholars like to explain this part of the parable by saying that the text was written after the fall of the temple in 70 CE and is thus the author adding personal touches to the story. But I think in light of our Old Testament reading that is too easy of a solution. After all our Old Testament reading finds a God who is jealously in love with us, and when we forsake a dynamic relationship with a living God for a god of our own making who will do as we wish, the holy God of Israel gets a little unhappy. This is a tension we Christians must be willing to wrestle with. Our God is a holy God who will not be mocked, but the same God is a forgiving God who will go to extraordinary lengths to restore relationship with humanity. If you figure out this tension let me know because I'm still working on it.

But having declared the original guests unworthy, the ruler sends his slaves out to find anyone who will come to the banquet. All are invited, both good and bad. If you want a picture of what this will look like, jump back to the parable of the two sons, where Jesus tells the Pharisees, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." What do the tax collectors and the prostitutes know that others might not? They understand that there is nothing they can do to earn their place at the table in the messianic banquet. They know they are there only because of God's gracious invitation. Remember, Jesus caused much trouble for the scribes and Pharisees when during his earthly ministry he chose to share a table with tax collectors and other such undesirable acquaintances. Most of us who work in churches know the old joke about how when Christians of certain denominations get to heaven, their section is a room with no windows. The room has no windows because members of that denomination could not stand to know that people from other

denominations got into heaven. Depending on your tradition the denomination with the private room changes, but everyone knows the joke. I imagine the Pharisees were much the same way. They spent their time making sure they kept the proper company, and felt like a gathering was proper only when they knew someone else had been excluded.

The movie *Chocolat* offers another view of the messianic banquet described in our parable today. This movie takes place in a small town in France in 1959. The town has always expressed their community life using the word “tranquillite” meaning tranquility. You knew what was expected of you, you knew what your place was. And if you happened to forget, someone would remind you. They trusted the wisdom of ages past, lived with the values of tradition, family, and morality. Into this town comes Vianne. She does not go to church, has a daughter without a father present, and has the gall to open a chocolate shop right in the middle of Lent! As she opens and conducts her business, it becomes clear that she is anything but traditional. Vianne does nothing by the book. She does nothing out of obligation, but everything out of love. Vianne welcomes the outcasts of the city into her shop. She even throws a dinner party for a cranky old lady, Armande, most of the townspeople feel should be in a nursing home. Her guests include a woman who against the town’s wishes has left an abusive marriage. Armande’s grandson, whom she is normally not allowed to see, is there. Also there is a woman who is learning to love again, even though the town expects her to still be mourning her husband who died over 40 years ago. Most scandalously, Vianne has invited the gypsies who traveled into town by boat a few weeks ago. Everyone there knows they are flying in the face of convention by consorting with each

other, so they are free to enjoy each other's company without judgment. A group of outcasts partaking of a meal and celebrating their own humanity, this is the messianic banquet. We will all be truly human there without the need to wear the masks or play the roles that society expects us to partake in.

But then the parable shifts and ends in a rather unexpected fashion. The ruler notices a man who is not wearing the customary wedding robe and he orders the man bound up and thrown out of the banquet. Let me restate that, the ruler who invited all to come in suddenly orders someone thrown out. "Many are called, but few are chosen," says the ruler. One can only imagine what this man must be thinking as he is dragged outside. "I was just minding my own business and suddenly I was partaking in wedding banquet I wasn't originally invited to but now I'm kicked out for not being dressed properly? This ruler guy is crazy!" But here again is the tension we must live with. I tend to think the improperly attired guest got off easy, considering what happened to those who didn't accept the invitation and attend the wedding to begin with. Remember- they're dead. So in a parable where most of the characters clearly represent something else, what does this person represent?

I think this man thrown out of the banquet represents those who call themselves Christians but show none of the signs of actually being Christian. The messianic banquet does have an invitation for all. "Many are called," the ruler tells the man. But few people are willing to bear the cross of Jesus and all it entails before they take their seat at the table. "But few are chosen," the ruler tells the man." Remember that Jesus will remind anyone who wants to follow him that they must first consider the cost. Like the wedding guests in the story rejecting the ruler's messengers, we reject prophets just

as easily as the Israelites did. Prophets are the ones who remind us to take up the cross, and that's not something that appeals to us. But by taking up the cross one also bears the fruit of the spirit that is the true identifier of a Christian. Most of us know the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control and gentleness. But what does that look like in the real world? I can see many examples of the fruit of the spirit here at Emory alone. The faithful work of our worship readiness and Sunday School teachers, the parents and youth who join me for our early morning youth council meetings, the Pastor Nominating Committee and their ongoing search for a permanent pastor for our church, the volunteers who make Parents Night Out or Wednesday Night Supper happen on a regular basis, the beautiful music of Elise and the choir, the generous giving of the church body during times of need, most recently in the form of the work we've done on a house for a family displaced by Hurricane Katrina, or the many others I could list here. All of these are places where the people of this church have sacrificed their time and energy to help Emory Church be a herald of the Risen Christ in a fallen world.

So my challenge for us today at Emory Church is this: First, we must realize that the table in the Kingdom of God is prepared for all and we must be constantly inviting others to join us, just as they are, at that table. We cannot make that table in our own image, instead we must celebrate the diversity and fellowship that will be there and rejoice at the grace that will be found in that moment. Second, those of us who dine at the messianic banquet must not leave the table the same as when we arrived. Our experience at the table with the messiah must lead us to take up our cross and bear the fruit of the spirit both at Emory Church and for the surrounding community. We must

ask God to show us where our gifts and calling meet the needs of others so that we may do the work that will usher in the messianic banquet. Finally, we must live in the tension of a God who calls and loves us just as we are but demands of us that we give all we have in service to the Kingdom of God.

To the Glory of God. Amen.