

SLD10.09.11 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 22:1-14
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Do Sweat the Small Stuff”

Okay, so there's what the text says and there's what I want to preach about, which aren't always the same thing. In case you ever wonder the relevance of lectionary, that three year cycle of assigned texts for preachers, here's an example of its discipline. Today we're celebrating World Communion and I can tell you that the last thing I want to preach about is a cranky king who wants to party but only on his own nutty terms. Like Nero who torched Christians to keep the mosquitoes down in his festive gardens.

Today when we're meant to be celebrating the communion of global Christians, what place is there, I'd like to know, for an imperious sovereign who loses his temper and knocks people off when he doesn't get his way? Where in a paean to world-wide Christianity am I supposed to fit blowing off generosity? Violence in the face of hospitality? Savage, vindictive over-reaction on the part of the state? The seemingly random humiliation and, ultimately, damnation, of some guy who doesn't meet some unspoken dress code?

What, on World Communion Sunday, are we supposed to do with that?

It starts out a nice enough scenario, a man of power, a king, throwing a wedding banquet for his son, inviting all his friends to come celebrate. The king's friends decline at first but still the host remains confident that if they only knew what a grand event is

being prepared, they will surely come. He sends his servants again to explain more fully. Still his friends refuse to come. And not only that, they kill his messengers. .

The story conforms to historical events. The king is God, offering the bounty of his kingdom to his best buddies, who, from Matthew's point of view, were, at least in the beginning, the nation of Israel. Only the nation of Israel mistreated and ignored the prophets God was forever sending to them. So finally God sends Jesus, whom Israel also rejects, and kills.

So far so good. God keeps sending a universal invitation to participate in God's shalom; humanity keeps rejecting it. We can relate, right?

At this point, Luke's version of the story takes a better turn than Matthew's. In Luke, God sends the invitation, God's friends make excuses, God gets mad, but nobody ends up killing anybody. Rather, Luke just has God say to his slaves, "To heck with those losers. Go out in the streets and bring in the poor and the pitiful, the mangled and the miserable, the least, the lost and the last, all the ones God likes best because at least they show up at his parties. The kingdom of God belongs to these," declares Luke. And so ends his story.

But not Matthew's. No, in Matthew the drama is heightened by the initial invitees killing God's messengers and then God killing them right back, which is way too close to how the world works for a World Communion Sunday.

Then the second crew goes out to round up a random crowd of good, bad, and uglies to fill the festal hall. In wanders the king who then notices somebody who's just not dressed right for the occasion.

Remember, these were random folks just going about their business when they were coaxed off the street by the king's messengers with the promise of a grand celebration. And somebody's not dressed for the occasion? The guy is speechless. Wouldn't you be? It's a set up!

But then the king has the guy tied up and thrown out into the weeping and gnashing of hell, and that, as my son, Christopher, would say, "that's just wrong."

Followed by the crowning platitude: "Many are called but few are chosen." Which means...?

Let's try and take it apart. Certain people are invited to the king's banquet; they'd be the "called ones," I guess. Only they don't accept the invitation. Few are called but most don't respond?

No, that's not it.

The king lowers the bar on the invitation list and invites everybody who's around whoever's around gets invited. They all come. Many are called and many respond?

Still not it.

Then king gets cranky and singles out some poor schlep in jeans and tennies, embarrasses him and throws him out. Many are called, many respond, but a few get jettisoned anyway? For bad taste?

I'm still grasping for the lesson here, aren't you?

Don't shop at thrift stores? Never leave your house with unmatched socks? Be ever mindful of the needs of God's fashion police? Next time God throws a fete, just send your regrets?

I'm just not getting it.

Maybe it would be helpful to know that this tale is set in the context of Jesus' final days in Jerusalem, when, at least in retrospect, everybody knows he's about to die. You see, by the time this story's written, 70 or more years have passed since Jesus' death. The Jews who follow Jesus aren't calling themselves Christians yet, but they've already started reaching out to the Gentiles, which everybody's not okay with. So tensions are pulsing not only between Jewish Jesus followers and traditional Jews, but between Jewish Jesus followers and Gentile Jesus followers. Is that why everybody's acting so crazy? Remarks one commentator,

"More allegory than parable, the melodrama of (Matthew's) story loses touch with all reality: troops execute guests and burn a city while a prepared meal is waiting. Those brought off the street are described in reductionistic moral terms – good and bad. And the man thrown out isn't just rejected but cast into the outer darkness of hell. Matthew is not being subtle at all," writes the commentator, as he writes not of a king and a banquet and guests, but of God, and the kingdom, of Jews and Gentiles, and the demands of the kingdom life."¹

Okay. But for us this is World Communion Sunday and reactionary melodrama is not only bad politics, it's rude and inappropriate. Today we are less interested in the perennial tensions between Jews and Gentiles (or Israelies and Palestinians, or Al Qaida and the western world) than we are in the ties that *bind* all Christians together regardless of nationality, race or creed.

If not for the inhospitable rejection of the guy with the mismatched socks, we could maybe go for the king's dinner party as an eschatological banquet, an endtimes gathering at Christ's table of all us stumbling, bumbling Christians on God's green earth.

¹ Ibid.

Only God's rejection of the fashion disaster makes any of our presence at the table seem pretty tentative. What if we forget to put on makeup?

Many are called but few are chosen.

I have wrestled with this text for its blessing but I swear it's only made me limp. The best I've been able to come up with is that maybe the randomness of both divine inclusiveness and divine rejection is meant to keep us humble, keep us from imagining for even a minute that we have any idea whatsoever about who's in and who's out, who should be sitting at Christ's table and who shouldn't. Maybe the king's bipolar responses are aimed simply to keep us on our toes, alert, awake (and anxious?) about God's expectations.

It's texts like these that can make a body want to stop trying to figure things out. As if anyone could. A judging God vs. a compassionate God. Universal salvation vs. only for the Elect. God's gift of grace vs. the requirements of discipleship. Dangling earrings or simple studs. Sensible shoes or sexy stilettos? Who can sort it all out? What works? What's true? What's faithful? What pleases God?

Let's just go back to the invitation. Gospel living begins with an invitation. From God to everybody. How we respond to that invitation to wholeness has something to do with both God's grace and our response to it. Whatever the mix, consent to and participation in gospel living is meant to lead to a transformed life. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Who can figure out God? Who can figure out ourselves? Still, we make choices, little gospel choices, every day.

When we're around somebody who is confusing, or hurtful, or unpredictable, like God seems to be in today's text from Matthew, we still have a choice about how to respond, how to conduct ourselves, how to react.

After wrestling with the complications of this text, it was a relief to me to hear that Karen wanted to do something very simple liturgical art-wise for today's service. Heather was reminded of the simplicity of the pebbles each of us placed in the bowl as we prayed for world peace during our Muslim/Christian Interfaith service. She pointed out that those small pebbles, the same ones Karen put in these glass candle holders on the communion table, are like the many small things each of us can do to bring peace, world peace, one small stone at a time, beginning with the transformation of our own hearts.

Everyone's invited to participate in that transformation. Many are too busy. Others can't be bothered. Still others think there's no transformation to be had. Once in a while, some of us accept the invitation, but not with our whole heart. What else is new?

Still, what can God do with even our smallest efforts and inclinations? Maybe we *should* "sweat the small stuff." Maybe God *is* in the details. Maybe it's in the small stuff, the details, that transformation begins. Maybe the small stuff is worth sweating because even the tiniest mustard seed of conscious consent to God's invitation in even just one teeny detail of our lives is enough for God to work with. Enough of a connection, or at least, enough of a crack or an opening in our routinized, self-absorbed, self-serving selves, for God to *spark* a connection with some other little something in us that will then register in a miniscule manner with a hint of a some other forgotten possibility

lodged in the concrete of our quotidian, just enough to jar it loose and let it waft its way toward a delicate drip of some insight that might give it enough weight to stroke ever so slightly the gossamer cheek of some newborn hope, which then flutters its eyes, and opens them, and tries to focus.

I don't know. Maybe it's too much of a stretch from the melodrama of a cranky king to the first flutter of something trying to be born in us. But maybe if we tried to get there on this World Communion Sunday when we celebrate everyone who has gathered at Christ's welcome table, it would put the king in a better mood.

To the glory of God. Amen.