

October 11, 2020 Sermon notes - 19th Sunday after Pentecost

“Rejoice in the Lord Always”

Aren't invitations a wonderful thing? An invitation comes when someone thought enough of you to send you a note to include you in a special event. Whether it is a birthday, house warming, retirement dinner or a wedding the fact that you have received an invitation means that you are, in some way, special in the eyes of the sender. It is always a thrill to be invited but is always requires an adjustment in our schedule. I don't recall ever being invited to something that didn't require me to choose between the activity to which I had been invited and something else - even if that something else was simply taking a day off. Invitations tell us that we are special and they assume that we think the sender is special enough to us so that we regard the invitation as significant. Sometimes the adjustments cannot be made to respond positively to the invitation but when the sender is truly special we can usually accommodate the request. Jesus told a parable about an invitation to a special event which was not regarded as all that special by the people invited. What hurt the sender was the priority (or rather the lack of priority) placed on the important event to which he had invited his friends. The fact that they had other things to do was not the problem - the problem was they chose to not set those things aside for the sake of their relationship with the sender of the invitation. The invitation was ignored or ridiculed rather than accepted and so those who had initially been invited were excluded and a new set of guests were invited instead. In the case of the parable the guests were invited to a feast and so it is a bit of a surprise to me that it was refused but the fact of the matter is that wonderful invitations are often refused for surprising reasons.

Like you I have had occasion to invite people to various events and like you I have had people refuse the invitation. I can relate to the king's anger and disappointment because it hurts when an invitation is refused, particularly when the event is very important to me. I can also relate to the people who found excuses because I don't accept every invitation that comes my way and I know that I have lost out on some important experiences because of those refusals. I don't think the parable Jesus was telling was meant to say that we have to accept every invitation. Jesus was telling this parable in the context of his other messages about the kingdom of heaven and so as we contemplate the meaning behind the parable it is important to include this fact as well. His audience included people who were busy going about their religious activities but weren't open to accepting the invitation to the 'wedding banquet' even though the bridegroom was right in front of them. The thrust of the parable was a warning that refusing certain invitations can have life changing circumstances.

Now, before going much further in this reflection I need to point out that Jesus was not

necessarily saying that those who refused the invitation were eternally cut off from God's blessing. He was saying that the participation in the wedding banquet was very important and there were consequences for refusing but we cannot say, from the parable, that those consequences were beyond God's forgiveness. I also want to point out that it is an invitation, not an open door. The one who was found inside without a wedding garment was no more welcome than those others who had refused the invitation. He was not welcome because, as evidenced by his clothing, he had not been invited.

So what does this parable mean in the context of the events in our lives today and in the context of the other readings provided for this liturgy? One of the things it means to me is to be thoughtful when receiving invitations and to not reject them simply because they might interfere with previous plans. As I think back I recall some absolutely wonderful 'interruptions' which came my way via an invitation from someone who thought I was special enough to be included. During one such event I was so powerfully touched by God that it completely changed the path of my life and during another I was confronted with my need to repent and set things right with some people I had offended. The King invites us to participate in the celebrations in which he is involved and we would do well to accept these invitations. Being thoughtful about the invitations I receive must include the awareness that I need to trust the judgement of the person who invited me. I have been invited to the event for a reason, a reason I might not know, and that needs to be factored into my consideration.

Another factor to consider is that for some invitations there will only be one chance to accept. The fact that the parable described an invitation to a wedding banquet probably meant that it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Perhaps the King had only one son so this was the one and only royal wedding celebration to be had and so it was a once in a lifetime kind of event. The decision to accept is a part of the arrangement and the importance of accepting the invitation rises in relation to how rare this invitation seems to be. To have missed out on the King's wedding feast meant missing out on having the opportunity to share in that kind of feast again. Sometimes we miss out on sharing in what God has in store for us and once the moment passes the chance is gone but other times we can have multiple opportunities to respond.

So, be ready for the invitations that come your way and be thoughtful regarding your choice. The people of Israel had been invited to participate in the grand story of God's redemption of the world but, as the story of the Golden Calf tells us, responded to a very different invitation and it cost some of them their lives and resulted in others enduring God's punishment. We get many invitations and it is up to us to discern which ones are invitations from God and which ones are invitations from God's enemy. If you wonder how to tell the two apart I think St. Paul has some suggestions beginning with 'rejoice in the

Lord always'. The way in which we can know which invitations come from God is by having the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds and the way to have that is to 'rejoice in the Lord and by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known to God' Developing a mindset of rejoicing takes some time and effort on our part but it is worth the effort. It essentially means to intentionally enjoy God's presence in our lives. When Paul and Silas had been arrested and imprisoned they spent the night singing hymns and psalms and spiritual songs - rejoicing in the Lord. When Peter and John were imprisoned they did the same kind of thing. Rejoicing in the Lord sometimes requires a conscious choice because the circumstances in which we find ourselves do not lend themselves easily to a joy filled attitude. This is not a call to ignore the difficulty but it is an invitation to recognize the presence of God and to rejoice in that presence.

Another way, St. Paul says, to have the God of peace with you is found in verses 8 and 9 of the 4th chapter of the letter to the Philippians. "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." I have found that having the God of peace with me helps me to respond appropriately to God's many invitations. I can't honestly say that I have responded to all of God's invitations but I can attest that the ones to which I have said 'yes' have been life changing and life affirming. I can also say that by following St. Paul's advice found in this portion of the letter to the Philippians I believe I have increased my ability to hear and then respond to the invitations.

No matter how long we have walked with God there is always more to see, more to experience, and more invitations to come. Keeping our minds on things above, cultivating an attitude of rejoicing, and focussing on our need to respond when God invites will keep us moving forward in our journey with God and give us the wonderful opportunity to be included in God's work and celebration. An invitation has been sent to you by God to participate in what is coming next on the journey. My prayer is that we will all hear and respond, that our minds will be focussed on the good things of God, and we will choose to rejoice in the Lord always.