

We have been reading through the gospel of Matthew over the past few weeks by following the lectionary, the passages assigned to each Sunday of the year. Today we move into the 22nd chapter. In this section of Matthew Jesus uses three parables to challenge the religious leaders in the Temple. Last week we read the second of these three and today we read the third.

I am going to do something I don't usually do and that is read the same parable from two different gospels. The gospel of Luke records this same parable. But Luke and Matthew tell this parable with some very clear differences.

My hunch is that after reading Luke's version we may say to ourselves, "yes, I agree with that. That's a good story Jesus." My hunch after we read Matthew's version is that we will say to ourselves, "Really? That's rather harsh."

Read Luke 14:16-24

Read Matthew 22:1-14

In Luke's version, people don't come to the party because they are distracted. People are distracted so the host simply extends the invitation list. Lots and lots of diverse people are invited to the party and everyone has a great time. For many of us that is our kind of party. A party where everyone is invited and everyone has a great time.

But Matthew's version of this story is VERY different. In Matthew's version, the one giving the party is a king who has power to enact vengeance against anyone who goes against his wishes.

In Matthew's version, the invitation is made and people make fun of the party. We don't know why they make fun of this party. But it gets worse because the servants who deliver the invitations get beaten and some of them killed. This is some serious party rejection.

The king, again a person with power and influence, sends in the troops. These troops destroy the city and kill the murderers. After this crusade of death and destruction the king then invites others, good and bad, to come to his party. I don't know about you but I would be one to make sure I accepted this new invitation.

And this is where it gets even worse in Matthew's version. One man shows up at the wedding wearing the wrong clothes. Not a big deal, right? Apparently, it is. The man who shows up under dressed for the occasion is bound and thrown out into the utter darkness.

In Matthew's version, this parable is summarized with a verse that many of us have heard but may not know where it is from. Jesus summarizes this parable with the words, "many are called but few are chosen."

In comparing these two gospels and the way they tell this story I would imagine that most all of us would gravitate toward the first parable. It's a nicer story. But both versions have made it into the Bible.

We could choose to ignore Matthew's version and just go with Luke's version. Or we can accept that maybe Matthew's version has something important to teach us. I am going to go with the second answer. I am going to go with the belief that Matthew's version has something very important to teach us.

As I read Matthew's version, I find myself challenged to affirm that deciding to follow Christ and be a part of a Christian Church cannot be a shallow commitment. It's either all in or stay out of the boat.

Many churches have chosen to take the route of ease and comfort. Many Christians have chosen to attend worship services that only make them feel comfortable and offer reassurance. Many pastors choose to be more focused on not being offensive than on being faithful.

But that is not what this passage is all about. In this passage that is recorded in Matthew, to be a follower of Jesus Christ means being led to uncomfortable places.

When we assess the effectiveness of this church, Allison Creek, we should be asking ourselves if we are challenging one another to be faithful. Are we simply affirming people to be what they already are when they encounter this place and its people? Or are we challenging people to be different than what they currently are? Are we challenging one another to grow in our faith?

If you feel yourself being pushed and prodded then maybe we are being faithful. If you feel that we here are simply affirming the status quo then maybe we are failing as a church.

I love that we have the Habitat Caravanners here for two weeks. You all model for us what it means to take chances. You have traveled from many parts of the country to come here to this place where South and North Carolina meet. You are putting your faith into action and not simply bidding time. By your presence you are giving witness to each of us to get outside of our comfort zone as well.

This parable as told by Matthew makes it clear that we are to take this commitment to Jesus Christ very seriously. If we are not changed by our relationship to Jesus Christ then why bother. If we don't act differently then we are wasting our time.

If we are a church that affirms people to be what they already are then we are like the ones in the story who the king has no use for. But if we are about the business of being led by God to encourage life transformation then we are being faithful.

In the parable that Jesus shares, the initial invitees to the party reject the invitation. After the rejection the king instructs his servants to reach out to the ones that are not initially invited. If we want to seek transformation like this parable invites us to then what does this look like for us? How are we being invited to expand who we are told to invite?

I want to leave us with a story as told by John Harkey who worked for many years with Eli Lilly & Company in Indiana. He shares about a recent experience.

“Following a recent inclusion training workshop, one of my sales representative colleagues residing in Iowa realized that for many years she had virtually ignored a large segment of the office staff and physicians in her territory who immigrated to the United States from India.

For the next six months she worked diligently to learn about the stories, culinary preferences and religious beliefs and practices of each member of the office staff. These stories and practices were, as you might imagine, quite different from her upbringing in rural Iowa.

For example, as her learning evolved, instead of offering a typical sandwich or barbeque for an office lunch, her insights inspired her to provide traditional Indian meals and desserts from local Indian restaurants. She also began to dedicate more of her precious “sales” moments to fellowship over meals with the staff.

This fellowship time allowed her efforts to originate from the heart instead of the head, and she soon found herself invited into the personal journeys of the staff members, including physicians who were prominent in the local medical community.

One day, one of her physician customers invited her to the dedication ceremony for a new temple that had been built in the community. She was humbled by the invitation and readily agreed to attend as his guest. When she arrived at the ceremony, she observed that she was the only person in attendance who was not from the Indian community and not a member of their religious tradition.

She also noticed that, because of her months of fellowship with the Indian community, she knew almost everyone at the dedication ceremony.

Her efforts to exhibit intentionally inclusive behavior was being reciprocated by her customers, who had now become her business partners and friends. Not surprisingly, the sales in her territory from these customers increased dramatically. And more importantly, the space in her heart that was occupied by these new relationships changed her life forever.”

If your life is not changed and your actions are not different, then being a follower of Jesus Christ and being a part of a Christian church is probably a waste of your time.

If you seek to be open to transformation then take some risks and be intentional in what you say and do towards people who may not be the ones who have been invited to the party before. AMEN.

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-Harkey, John, <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/reformed-inclusion/>

-Given: October 15, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)