

Proper 23, Year A: 9 October 2011

Soon you're going to have somebody else standing here
and you'll be adjusting to a different style of preaching.
I hope you'll give them the same strong response you've given me;
and give them grace and room to be different from me.
I say the same strong response,
but I have to be clear that you are not all the same.
And sometimes that's a little confusing to the preacher.
One of you wants me to be more topical, to take a stand on the issues of the day;
another doesn't believe that politics and religion should ever meet,
let alone in the mouth of the priest.
One of you wants me to teach more in my sermons, to use the tools of Biblical criticism;
another appreciates informal, story-telling presentations.
One of you wants me to reveal more of myself, to make the sermons personal;
another values the generic approach,
which she says often seems directed right at her anyway.
Actually, I'm surprised I could summarize that many points of view,
because in most p[laces I've served,
9 times out of 10 no one says *anything* about the sermon!
So you kinda wonder, why bother?
That's rhetoric dear friends; I know why I bother
and I'm perfectly happy to leave what I say between you and the Holy Spirit
to work out together.

But all of this is because today I've got to say
that I do not feel like preaching the gospel; I really don't.
Don't be too shocked—I don't mean I've suddenly developed
an antipathy to the Good News or anything—
I just mean that I'm tired of this particular set of Matthean passages
and their steady harangue about the effort it takes to be a good Christian.
As much as it appeals to my latent works theology,
I mean c'mon, enough is enough already!

The author of Matthew must have thought his audience was pret-ty slow.
That's the only reason I can think of for this constant repetition,
especially for putting *this morning's* parable right on the heels of *last week's*.
The story of both is essentially the same: although placed in the mouth of Jesus,
each is actually an allegory *about* Jesus devised by the early Church
to explain why *they* have become the inheritors of the promised Kingdom
instead of the people of Israel.
And the message is essentially the same in both: unless we produce good fruit,
unless we wear the right clothes to the wedding,
at the last day God will refuse to recognize us.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
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Part of the problem is that this is very difficult stuff, and I get worn down.
Not that it's hard to understand—
skipping over the anti-Semitism, I think the author's meaning is still crystal clear:
"Many are called but few are chosen."—but it is hard to hear and accept.
It seems awfully conditional.
Whatever happened to the notion of being saved by faith,
so dear to the heart of Reformation theology,
of God's free gift of salvation extended to all in Christ Jesus?
It would seem that for the evangelist, entrance into the kingdom
is all about our response to God's invitation.
Okay, so what exactly does that entail?

Invitation and response, invitation and response.
These are always the basic questions before us in reading Matthew.
Where in our lives does God invite us? How do we respond to God's call?
I have said before that the answer involves our total stance before the Holy One,
but what does that mean, *really*?
The evangelist seems to be getting at the same thing
with his image of wearing the proper wedding garment.
But what does *this* mean?
It's all so vague; I sure wish Scripture were clearer sometimes!
However, if we are looking for clues,
I think that the other three readings today suggest a good starting place:
"O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name," says the prophet,
and then he describes the consolation and comfort God provides for the unfortunate.
"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," sings the psalmist.
And the epistle continues the strain: "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul begins,
and then he lists a variety of virtues we should embrace as followers of Christ.
"Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,
and the God of peace—a peace beyond your comprehension—will be with you."

It seems, from these passages, to be a matter of attitude.
I'm reminded of the old 12- Step slogan: the attitude is gratitude.
Now, before you dismiss this as too easy,
remember that none of these writers is exactly a Pollyanna figure:
you know, the sort who refuse to ever see anything wrong with life.
Isaiah regularly attacked the social and economic injustice and hypocrisy
rampant in the political and religious circles of his day.
The psalmist is often as ready to lament as to exult.
And Paul regularly writes of the hardships he endures in his ministry.

Yet for each writer there is an attitude of thankfulness before God
that transcends whatever is going on in their personal lives *or in the world at large*.
Thus Isaiah can say, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation."
The psalmist too ends on an up note:
"Surely God's goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."

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And elsewhere in his letter Paul tells the Philippians,
"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

So, what do I make of this for us today?

Well, certainly that the first step in responding to God's invitation is acknowledging with full and grateful hearts everything that God has done for us. The first step? Isn't that enough? By no means. It's only the beginning. When you get a wonderful gift from someone, a surprising gift that you never expected, a gift that takes your breath away, that makes you laugh and cry at the same time—what do you do? You say thank you, I'm sure, but then what? Don't you treasure that gift, put it on a special shelf, tell everybody about it and show it off? And don't you look for some way of giving that person a gift in return?

I'm sure you see where I'm going with this: God has given us so much: the gift of life, the gift of the cosmos, the gift of divine companionship, the gift of redemption.

What do we do with that gift?

I say "gift" singular because it's all one, really, all part of God's great love for us.

So how do we begin to say thank you? What gift can we possibly give in return?

Again, I think you know the answer.

We only have to look ahead twenty verses in Matthew to find it.

We *attempt* to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind.

And then we attempt to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Even more particularly, we attempt to love one another as Christ loved us:

in a way that involves the total out-pouring of our lives.

This is the gift God hopes for;

deep in God's heart of hearts, *this* is the longed-for response.

I say "we attempt" to do these things because we all know that this is not an easy gift for us to give.

Certainly not 100% of the time.

Maybe the Mother Theresa's of the world, but not me.

I get tired; I get petty and whiney and sometimes downright mean;

I am sometimes ungrateful and I sometimes take the gift for granted.

And boy it's hard to love my neighbors sometimes—at all, let alone in a self-giving way.

In all these things, done and left undone,

I have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

So...so I confess, if I can, I drop to my knees

and I whisper my apologies to God for coming up short yet again.

And Abba, my loving Mother-Father God, gives me yet another gift:

God holds me tight and whispers back that it's alright, that the point never was perfection, just the attempt.

Let us pray.

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Good and gracious God, who are we that you have loved us so well?
How is it that you continue to invite us to the banquet,
that you give us this world of ours, each other, and a future that is in our hands,
while we so often find ourselves without the proper wedding garment,
or a gift to offer in return?
We have need of your compassion, your power, and your wisdom.
Our own has once again proven inadequate in the face of so much need.
Be strong in us. Purify our intentions. Deepen our commitment.
Be for us all that we need. Be God for us. We await your saving presence. Amen.

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