

October 11, 2020

Jeff reflects on Matthew 22:1-14

“Many are called, but few are chosen.”

On Thanksgiving weekend, we say ‘Thanks be to God’ for many things, but I find it difficult to read this line from Matthew’s gospel – “Many are called, but few are chosen” – and then say “Thanks be to God.”

In elementary school, we played baseball during the lunch period. We were organized into teams one day in the gym. Everyone sat on the floor in one area of the gym, while team captains, seated on the stage, rotated choosing players. Once you were chosen, you moved to a different area of the gym.

One of the captains was a friend of mine. He chose me for his team. I don’t recall precisely, but I suspect I was about his 6th choice. Shortly after I had been chosen, and had moved to the ‘chosen’ section of the gym, our teacher came into the gym. After a couple of minutes he interrupted the selection process to say, “Jeff, you should be sitting over there, not with the ones who have already been chosen.”

My friend turned to the teacher and said, “I’ve already picked him.”

Many are called, but few are chosen.

I knew I had not already been chosen because of skill, ability or anything I had done to ‘earn’ being chosen. I was chosen because someone chose friendship over merit.

‘Few are chosen’ may be hopeful for those who are chosen, but not for those who are not; those who assigned to the non-chosen section of life.

The parable of the banquet, as told in Matthew’s Gospel, is a story of God’s kingdom impinging on the regular protocols and systems of this world, surprising everyone by giving us a glimpse of grace in places of divisive behaviours.

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven can be compared to...” – comparisons can be either favourable or negative. The king has prepared a wedding banquet. He sends slaves to tell the people who had been invited and were waiting to be summoned.

But no one comes. Some just ignore the invitation, some say they are busy, and some react with violence, beating and killing the slaves.

The king, the most militarily powerful person in the kingdom, is angered – angered because the people’s refusal to come is a rejection of the king’s authority, is an insult to the king’s hospitality, and is an act of resistance to the king’s power. The killing of the king’s messengers is an act of rebellion, murder, civil war. So the king sends troops, to put an end to the killing by means of more killing. Those who refused the summons are killed. The troops burn the city to the ground. The king has sent a clear warning to anyone else who might consider refusing a royal invitation.

The king still has a wedding feast to be enjoyed. So, the king sends more slaves into the streets and tells them to invite everyone they find to come to the wedding banquet.

There is no longer a set guest list. Now anyone might show up – shop keepers, beggars, children, women fetching water from a communal well, religious leaders...everyone means anyone. The slaves, we are told, gathered people – both the good and the bad – and the wedding hall was filled.

Protocol has been discarded, except, those who arrive are expected to put on a special 'wedding' robe. The king discovers that one of his uninvited-invited guests is not properly dressed. Again, violence is evoked, and the 'guest' is bound and thrown out the door.

Like many of Jesus' parables, this one challenges us to discover the kingdom of God within this story.

Which is a lot like life – where do we catch glimpses of God in a world in which privilege, abusive power and violence still seem so prevalent?

In this parable, we glimpse God in a moment that seems accidental; a moment of indiscriminate oneness as the good and the bad, as the beggar and the artisan, as anyone and everyone come together to share food, to become, for just a moment, a community of those who shouldn't have been invited. This is the moment that never happens - but does; the moment of blessing shared amongst everyone; the moment when we are united by our shared humanity, by God's surprising vision of unexpected abundance.

It's the moment that exists even in this story of inequality. It's the moment that reminds us that God is often glimpsed in the exceptions to the 'norm'.

In Jesus' time, Caesar was referred to as the Son of God. The Roman Empire was the supreme and dominant military power. The world seemed to belong to kings who decided who came to the banquet and who didn't...

But, on the margins of this empire, was the prophet from Nazareth, telling his odd stories, opening closed eyes, giving vitality to petrified limbs, eating with anyone and everyone.

During a final meal with his friends, Jesus said to them, "I do not call you servants. I call you friends."

God's banquet invitation is not based on anyone's privilege, position or power. God's invitation is offered from Friendship. God's love does not exclude anyone from the banquet of God's blessing of love.

This past week was the birthday of Desmond Tutu. Tutu once said, "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. (God's) standards are quite low."

God's standards are the standards of Friendship, of a love that does not reward worth... but bestows worth, the standard of a Christ who calls us to love one another as we have been loved by the One who chooses from a place of Friendship.

This Thanksgiving, let us be thankful for the glimpses of God seen wherever food is shared with anyone and everyone as a gift of friendship; seen in those who wear masks as a gift of friendship to anyone and everyone; seen in surprising acts of indiscriminate kindness and care amongst anyone and everyone; seen when those not invited, those not chosen, are called friends and find themselves guests at God's table.

This Thanksgiving, let us be thankful that God calls with the voice of a Friend, and chooses with a heart of divine Love. Thanks be to God. AMEN