

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 12, 2014

"It's Party Time."

Matthew 22:1-14, Philippians 4:4-9

A first grade teacher gave her 6-year-olds an assignment. The next day they were to bring in a symbol of their religion. The next morning she called on Isaac, who stood up and said, "I am Jewish and this Star of David is the symbol of my religion." The teacher then called on Mary, who stood up saying, "I am Catholic and this Rosary is a symbol of my religion." Next came Bobby. "I am Methodist," he said, and held up a casserole dish.

Have you ever noticed how often food and drink are mentioned in the New Testament? How about banquets and weddings? Jesus even called the church his bride!

In our text for the day, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a king whose son was getting married. The king sent forth his servants to invite people to the wedding feast. In Jesus' time, weddings were huge events that could often last a week or longer. Many parents saved up for years in order to throw a lavish celebration. For this reason, wedding invitations were serious matters. They represent an enormous investment. But many who were invited to this wedding ignored the invitation. This displeased the king, as you might expect, and he told his servants to forget about those who had been invited and gather up anyone they could find off the streets to bring them to the wedding feast instead. And the image we have is a wedding feast attended by the homeless, the rejected, winos and prostitutes, people off the streets. And there was a great party--thrown not for society's elite, but for all who would accept the invitation.

There was a family reunion at a local park many years ago. Everyone was excited about re-connecting with distant relatives. But as the families settled in for the picnic, they noticed one young man who seemed out of place. He was painfully thin and dressed in threadbare clothes. No one recognized him. Slowly, it dawned on some of the family members that this young man was probably homeless and definitely hungry, and that he had wandered into the family reunion in the hopes of getting a good meal. They decided to make him a member of their family that day. They fed the young stranger platefuls of food, and included him in all their games and activities. And everyone had a great time.

The kingdom of heaven is like that, says Jesus. All who will come are invited. No one is left out. The kingdom is like a family reunion--like a fun party--like a wedding feast. And why shouldn't we picture the kingdom life as a feast? Just think what happens when you accept Christ's invitation to the wedding feast?

For one thing, you have a new reason to live. The sad thing about most people today is not that they have problems. The sad thing is that they have no purpose.

In a cartoon by Charles Schultz, Lucy tells Charlie Brown that she's decided to begin a new hobby. Charlie Brown commends her decision, saying how important it is to accomplish something meaningful with your life. In response Lucy says something like this, "Accomplish something? I thought all we were supposed to do was keep busy!"

There are many of us who are keeping very busy, but we are not accomplishing very much. We are here, then we are there, ultimately we are all over the place, but we are not getting anywhere specific. We pursue many pleasures, but find little that brings us lasting happiness.

It is a finding that is confirmed time and time again. If you feel a sense of purpose for your life, you will be far healthier and happier than you would be without that sense of purpose.

Myrtle Howell was ninety-one years old, and feeling like her life had no more meaning. At one point, she actually prayed that God would either give her a purpose or take her life. God chose the first option. He gave Myrtle the desire to start a pen-pal relationship with prisoners.

She wrote a kind letter to the Atlanta Penitentiary, offering to correspond with any prisoners who need a friend. And she signed the letter, "Grandmother Howell."

Little did Myrtle Howell know what she was getting herself into. The prison inmates desperately needed the love and attention that she had to give them. Over the years, she ended up corresponding with hundreds of hurting people. One inmate wrote that she had believed herself to be incapable of love, but she loved her

Grandmother Howell. And Myrtle found that her last years were her most fulfilled ones, because she had a ministry that gave her such joy.

Karl Henrich will be ninety-one years old. He has a purpose in his life. He has planted fruit trees for at least sixty years and is still planting them. He is a genius when it comes to pruning and crafting trees. He still drives his big tractor all through the country side. When asked, he smiles and replies, "I plant them for my children, my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren, not just to enjoy the delicious fruit, but also for them to know the labor that is involved to enjoy it." He shares his wisdom with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and teaches them how to achieve the best fruit possible. As this is his purpose in life, he will continue to do this until he meets his Lord.

The happiest people are those who have something to live for. Deep in your heart I believe that you know that, don't you? And it has nothing to do with our bank account or our stock folio. Material success can give us a feeling of relief, but it cannot give us joy. It can ease our fears about the future, but it cannot fill that future with love and peace and hope.

You and I are invited to experience life as we have never experienced it before--with joy and exhilaration and love. We are invited to a feast.

But there is an addendum to this parable. There was a man at the wedding feast who was not properly dressed for the occasion. That should not be surprising. Where would homeless people find proper clothing for a wedding feast? Why was the king so upset with this one man?

Scholars tell us that in Jesus' time, kings often gave their guests fine robes to wear during their visit. The king was not rejecting this person because he had worn the wrong clothes. The king would have willingly supplied the right clothes for his guest. Evidently, though, the guest had not felt it necessary to accept the king's offer of fine robes. He had chosen to stay in his own clothes instead.

So it is with us. We want to enjoy the feast, but we do not want to put on the new garment God has for us--the garment of a new purpose for our lives, the garment of love for all people, the garment of personal responsibility, the garment of a new walk with God. We have on the wrong apparel to enjoy the feast, and we never discover all that God has laid up for us.

You heard it said, "Life is a banquet, and most poor fools are starving to death." The kingdom of God is a banquet, a feast, and a party all rolled into one. But many are starving. Why? Because we will not accept God's invitation to come to the feast.