

## In Hope of Becoming the Church: Part II

Rev. Nick Hatch

Matthew 22:1-14

October 15, 2023

Will you pray with me?

God of invitation, help us to continue sharing your message by joining in your abundant banquet. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Today is the second half of series called "In Hope of Becoming the Church". Last week we heard the The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. We considered how our church community needs the cornerstone of Christ to break us open for a new future together. This week we confront a second challenging parable regarding our response to God's persistent invitations.

Invitations often provide hard lessons, like in this joke.

An 85 year old couple, having been married almost 60 years, die in a car crash. They had been in good health the last ten years, mainly due to the wife's interest in health food.

When they reached the pearly gates, St. Peter took them to their mansion, which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen and master bath suite with Jacuzzi. As they "oohed and aahed", the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost.

"It's free," Peter replied, Remember, this is Heaven."

Next, they went out back to see the championship golf course the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges every day, and each week the course changed to a new one representing the great golf courses on Earth. The old man asked, "What are the green fees?"

"This is heaven," St. Peter replied. "You play for free."

Next, they went to the clubhouse and saw the lavish buffet lunch with the cuisines of the world laid out. "How much to eat?" asked the old man.

"Don't you understand yet?" St. Peter asked. "This is heaven. It's free!"

"Well, where are the low fat and low cholesterol foods?" the old man asked timidly.

"That's the best part...you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is Heaven."

The old man looked at his wife and said, "You and your stupid bran muffins. I could have been here ten years ago!"

It is true though; invitations often provide hard lessons. And we are good missing or misinterpreting the lessons they provide.

In our scripture today, Jesus's words show the deep interrelationship that exists for people of faith between grace in our election, the will of God to gather a people, and our obligations as obedient people the faith.

Election, or "Gods Election" is a biblical theology that claims God chooses people, historically Israel is the clearest example of a people elected by

God, people lifted up to manifest a community and ethics that God favors. Specifically in our parable, election relates to those chosen to receive God's goodness and invited to dine at God's wedding table. The invitation is sent **NOT** to those who must accept *in order to be* part of God's household; the invitation is sent to those *already* part of God's household-part of the king's kingdom.

Jesus said:

*Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so, the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

It is God's natural will to gather people together. It is God's natural self to deepen bonds and work for the building of community. God sends messengers. Even when God's messengers were mocked, even when God's invitation was made light of, even when those sent on God's behalf were mistreated and killed: God still engages in the work of gathering through invitation.

In the adapted version of the UCC statement of faith it says:

*God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. -UCC Statement of Faith*

As a church I wonder have we been obedient messengers to extend our invitation? Have we missed or misinterpreted God's call, made light of God's generosity?

When a faith community engages in visioning work, we are engaging in the mighty task of discerning God's call for the ways and means to extend God's invitation and to gather God's people. We move from being the "invited" to being the "inviters", those who often uncomfortably, serve as God's messengers. It's an intentionally risky progression to get out of our building and into the world and into the streets. Like moving from being only welcoming, to extending the warm embrace of belonging.

But if you are like me, I have so much energy for visioning work: then I just want to work! In light of all the invitations to visioning meetings we have had these past few years I have wondered aloud:

"Another meeting?"

"How many acronyms do we really need?"

"How many consultants and brunches and little colored dots on pieces of paper do we need do we need to get going?"

"Why can't we just get on with things and move forward?"

My questions make light of deeply important obligations. and

It's easy to make light of a risky invitation into moving out into an uncertain world. Its more serious discerning how our response to God's graciousness

and the wealth of resources First Congregational can unleash on behalf of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

A year ago, I could never have imagined I would receive an invitation from this church to be a Co-Lead pastor, let alone, that I would be willing to say “Yes!” and feel so deeply excited and honored. “Yes! Consider me! I wanna move out and help be the messenger to fill the guest list and celebrate with all of you!”

Last week I shared a few of my thoughts about being a Co-Lead pastor. It’s an unusual opportunity within a protestant church; most often those serving as an Associate move to a new church to change their ministry role. I have been reluctant to express interest or adversely influence this discernment process: it’s so important that First Congregational's lay leaders and you, the church, own, making the invitation. I have queried my self-interests and skillsets many times wondering if this Co-Lead model is a calling from God.

I was talking with my Bob my executive coach this summer. We were sitting on the campus of St. Norbert, wondering about my gifts and you, this church. The leaves were blowing and shimmering in a light breeze, birds sang, we watched the Fox River slowly flowing by. Golden Dandelions were dripping with bees. My heart was just filled with concern for our church. After a while Bob said “My gosh Nick, how much more of an invitation do you need to help lead this church you care about so deeply and served for over a decade? They have nothing to lose with you! I know you will stay regardless of the job you are offered.”

Bob was a messenger: inviting me into a future I could not imagine or control. I was speechless. We sat in silence.

Consider this joke-

The President invites the Pope to lunch on a boat. The Pope accepted and during lunch, a puff of wind blew the pontiff's hat off, right into the water. It floated off about 50 feet, then the wind died down and it just floated in place.

The crew and the Secret Service were scrambling to launch a boat to go get it, when Biden waved them off, saying, "Never mind boys, I'll get it."

Then Joe climbed over the side of the yacht, walked on the water to the hat, picked it up,

walked back on the water, climbed into the yacht, and handed the Pope his hat.

The crew was speechless. The security team and the Pope's entourage were speechless. No one knew what to say, not even the Pope.

But that afternoon, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, MSNBC reported: "BIDEN CAN'T SWIM"

God's presence is often missed or misinterpreted. Even the most faithful of us stand speechless, hesitant when the Spirit is at work. Invitations are often missed or misinterpreted, especially God's invitations calling us to take risk and robe ourselves in a new garment bestowed by the Holy Spirit.

I believe the Holy Spirit is leading our dynamic church right now in marvelous ways. We have put in years of hard work discerning how we might become even more timely and prepared messengers to gather people on behalf of God for a banquet unlike any other.

We have learned that:

1. Our church has the faith, the inspiration, and the resources to pursue a purpose of "... following Jesus Christ into the world to love and serve our neighbors" by being curious, creative, and having courage.

We have learned that:

2. We are moving into a future that will not be like our past. We will need to reflect and be relevant for the growing diversity within our community.

We have learned that:

3. We must expect the work ahead to kindle our creativity and collaboration. It will test our flexibility and stretches our resources. We will need to take bold decisions, incorporate new leadership, and trust in the calling of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, we are in the middle of responding to this amazing invitation. We are considering a new staffing structure which we believe will allow us to be nimble. We are forming a steering committee and beginning an implementation phase. We will be assessing building needs and options, evaluating community collaboration opportunities, and reviewing financing requirements and capital campaign prospects.

In the words of our church moderator “After 10 years of asking questions, we are ready to begin the work.”

We are moving from passively receiving invitations to being messengers for the fox valley gathering future generations to know the water of baptism and be nourished from this table.

I wonder how will we respond as a church? Will we make light of this incredible opportunity? Dismiss or misinterpret it?

Lastly, in Matthew, we have this troubling ending of this parable:

*For many are called but few are chosen.*

What do we do with this guest who appears to choose to attend, to respond to God’s invitation, but then is terribly cast into the outer darkness?

Well actually, this is part of a larger narrative in Matthew. Just as last week we heard Jesus words as a promise

*Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.*

The unrobbed wedding guest is another way Jesus is trying to steer us individually, and as a faith community back to fruitfulness, to being fruitful. It was custom to wear a robe, a wedding robe, when invited to a feast. It was a form of showing honor and expressing gratitude. The robe would have been expensive; it came at a personal cost. Thus, this guest was willing to show up for the free dinner, but unwilling to make the commitment of



obtaining and wearing what was customary to fully participate in this banquet of grace.

Maybe he could not afford such a robe, maybe he forgot, whatever the case one theologian says:

*His downfall comes in the moment when, asked by the host to account for the way he appears, he has nothing to say. – Richard Spalding*

And so, this parable leaves us with the divine paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty. There is a tension between our responsibility as people of faith, the choices we make, our obedience and preparation; and the reality that God is sovereign, God is the one doing the choosing.

Every member of the body of Christ is invited by God to be fruitful.

First Congregational is a unique church, called by God to be messengers of an invitation that is both wide and welcoming.

You are chosen by God through specific invitations. You are a unique child of God and you are on God's guest list.

And when the king comes and asks us all "How did you get here"? Will we be speechless? Ready to be held to account? Lest we forget, many are called, but few are chosen. Lest we forget a vision of a banquet of abundance for those yet to know that they belong. Lest the halls are empty.

Amen.