

*A Fresh Look at Love – Part 2*

Matthew 22:1-14 October 15, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley  
Congregational Church of Northridge

Look at that (projected on the screen is an image of sheet music) – lovely, isn't it?

For most of us, that page doesn't mean much of anything, and even people who read music miss the beauty of the song.

Sheet music isn't to be looked at, or just admired for its elegant symbols.

No.

Sheet music is an invitation to sing, to play, and to dance.

In the same way, the Bible is an invitation.

What do I mean by that?

It means that the Bible is an invitation for us to engage to God's narrative – to see how God has been at work in history, and then to do likewise.

It is an invitation to engage in what God is up to in this moment, in these circumstances.

And what does that look like?

Jesus often used parables to describe the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven, depending upon which Gospel you're reading).

So, today's parable is another of Jesus' lessons about the Kingdom of Heaven, and he says the Kingdom of Heaven is like when God throws a party.

*Matthew 22:2 The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.*

Remember, when Jesus describes the Kingdom, he's not talking about an afterlife ... he's saying this is what it's like to live right here and now when you've given yourself over to God.

Yes, you've got problems, no, life isn't perfect – but God wants to shower you with blessings ... it's like being invited to a royal feast.

*Matthew 22:4 Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.*

But one by one the king (whom we metaphorically understand as God) is snubbed by people with excuses.

They've got business to attend to, family events to arrange, and many worries that preoccupy them.

There are so many things that distract us from participating in Kingdom life.

This was part of a series of three parables Jesus told in response to the religious authorities' objections to his radically-inclusive teaching.

Jesus was a threat to a religious worldview that classified everything and everyone as "clean" or "unclean", "worthy" or "unworthy" – a worldview Jesus challenged head-on.

Women were among his disciples, he dined with tax collectors, hobnobbed with prostitutes, touched lepers, and praised Samaritans ... he kept pushing the limits of what was comfortably defined as acceptable.

In this parable, Jesus gets right in their faces as he equates the religious leaders to the respectable people who ignore God's invitation to the banquet, and who then murder the messengers of God's grace.

But the king responds by expanding the realm of the invitation.

*Matthew 22:9-10 MSG "Go out into the busiest intersections in town and invite anyone you find to the banquet." The servants went out on the streets and rounded up everyone they laid eyes on, good and bad, regardless. And so the banquet was on—every place filled.*

It turns out that God's love isn't fazed by who we decide is good or bad – all God's children are welcome.

You may remember a few years back when I rode the AIDS LifeCycle from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

With your help I raised over \$10,000 for the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center's work with HIV patients.

One of the training sessions included a van tour of some of the facilities that the Center supports.

As we were riding the van, people were chatting and getting to know each other, someone asked me what I did for a living.

I said, "I'm a pastor of a church up in the San Fernando Valley."

An awkward silence descended the van until someone finally asked, "Then what are *you* doing here?"

Their experience was that religious-types' are hostile toward the LGBT community.

How has Jesus' message gotten so distorted by today's Pharisees?

How did his message of inclusivity get hijacked?

Last week we talked about how love becomes idolatrous when we think of the object of our love as perfect, as one who will make us complete.

We spent a long time unpacking that understanding, but the bottom line is that such love will always fail because we eventually realize that the other person is not perfect and that they can never make us whole.

In fact, such a relationship will become toxic because the implied – maybe subconscious – message is that "I'll love you *as long as* I believe in your perfection or in your ability to make me feel whole."

Once that illusion cracks, so does the relationship.

Love, not a person, is what gives beauty and meaning to that person and to our life.

Because of love, an ordinary “someone” is transformed into a precious person of infinite depth and value.

And then last week we connected that insight about human love with the foundation of Christian faith, which is the Holy Trinity.

The Trinity is the divine mystery where Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in a perfect relationship of love.

It’s their *relationship* that is essential to understanding the Trinity.

It is a relationship between them, and one which we are invited to share.

The human tendency is to objectify God, to put God into a neatly defined box, a philosophical construct that we stand outside of and analyze.

But God is not a thing out there.

God is infinite and ineffable, and so any time we think we can fully understand, control or manipulate God, we’ve strayed into the realm of idolatry.

As St. Augustine said, “If you have understood, you have not understood God.”

A god we can package will fail us as surely as the lover we fantasize will make us whole and complete.

This is what the 13<sup>th</sup> Century mystic Meister Eckhart meant when he famously wrote, “I pray God to rid me of God.”

He’s saying, I want to let go of all the small concepts of God we’ve created to manipulate and worship.

You can’t climb a mountain to see, hear or touch the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, but you can participate in the love that circulates and vibrates between them and is the source of all life.

The Apostle John nailed this when he wrote 1John 4:16 *God is love*.

Not to philosophize about it, analyze it, restrict it, judge others with it ... but to join it, to live it, to dance it.

That is the contrast between Jesus and the religious leaders who marched Jesus to the cross.

*Ephesians 5:1-2 MSG Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.*

If you don't love, you'll experience the world as a bleak, meaningless landscape.

You might latch onto a few rules to guide you through life, but you're likely to become rigid and joyless.

Eating without love is just ingesting fuel, but with love it becomes a meal – maybe even a sacred gathering.

Without love, a walk through the forest is just getting from here to there, but with love it becomes a life-giving communion with nature.

Rob Bell tells about a friend who's lost patience with endless theological debates, and the Fundamentalists' scripture quoting that pits Christians against another.

Nowadays, whenever someone tries to engage him in one of those nit-picking, heady arguments, the man gently raises his hand and asks, "And how's that working for you?"

Because, yes, there's a place for the discipline of study, but when it becomes a substitute for participating in God's love by doing the things Jesus instructed – forgiving our enemies, nurturing ourselves, caring for the poor, welcoming the alien, challenging social boundaries that turn any of God's children into outcasts – at that point we need to let it go.

And even if you don't philosophically believe that there is some overarching purpose to life, once you love you cannot help but experience life as meaningful.

When you let go of judgment and doubt and surrender yourself to love, then compassion and meaning – which you can no more touch, taste, smell, hear or see than you can touch God – become the most real things in your life.

The religious authorities objectified people who didn't fit into their definitions of who's acceptable and who's not.

When we objectify people, they become faceless to us.

When we objectify people, we become blind to their dreams, their potential, and their suffering.

People escaping paramilitary death squads, brutal street gangs, or crushing poverty are dismissed as faceless, illegal aliens and herded into inhuman detention centers by goodhearted people.

Maybe it is particularly hard in this political climate where we feel forced to take sides – where people have become pawns in emotional, polarized debates.

Which is why the parable closes with the uncomfortable scene of the man who accepted the king's invitation to the banquet, but then did not put on the proper wedding attire – metaphorically, actually following the way of Jesus.

All are invited to the Kingdom, but God expects more than just chowing down on the feast.

A few years ago, I shared something that the Baptist professor Tony Campolo did while in Hawaii.

One night he had trouble sleeping, so he left his hotel room to find a coffee shop.

He said, *“This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, “greasy spoon.”*

*I did not even touch the menu.*

*The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, “What d'ya want?”*

*I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.*

*He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him.*

*As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.*

*It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me.*

*Their talk was loud and crude.*

*I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."*

*Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what's that to me?"*

*"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me.*

*"Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. I don't want anything from you. It's not like I was hinting for a birthday party."*

*When I heard that, I made a decision.*

*After they left, I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"*

*"Yeah!" he answered.*

*"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"*

*"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"*

*"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him.*

*"What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"*

*A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!"*

*Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"*

*His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley.*

*She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."*

*"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"*

*"No way," he said. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."*

*At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!"*

*I decorated the diner from one end to the other.*

*The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and me!*

*At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"*

*Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned.*

*Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit.*

*As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her.*

*Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.*

*Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles!"*

*Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes ... we all want some cake."*

*Agnes looked down at the cake.*



*Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean is it okay if I kind of - I want to ask you is- is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"*

*Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."*

*"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"*

*She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door.*

*As we all just stood there motionless, she left.*

*When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place.*

*Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"*

*It just felt like the right thing to do.*

*I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation.*

*I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.*

*When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"*

*In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."*

*Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"*

*Wouldn't we all?*

*Wouldn't we all like to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning?"*

The Kingdom of Heaven, says Jesus, is like a party where everyone is invited – and where everyone is supposed to participate once there.

We've each whored in some way: We've compromised our values to win approval; we've ignored racist jokes or bullying in the workplace; we've stayed quiet to avoid rejection; we've been silent about our faith; we've ignored the immigrant, the homeless or the aged.

And, we each feel a shame inside ... sometimes we aren't sure of its source, but we feel that we're not good enough, we're flawed in some way, we're afraid if people *really* knew us that they'd reject us.

But the Good News is that you, too, are invited to the divine banquet.

God waits at the door hoping that you'll accept His invitation and share in His love.