

October 9, 2005
Exodus 32:1-14, Matthew 22:1-14
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“A Delicate Balance”

This past New Year's Eve, we celebrated our daughter Allison's wedding in the church I served in South Carolina. Our children were raised in that church. My family had lived in that community for generations. As anyone who has ever planned a wedding knows, there are an astonishing number of decisions to make. Over many months, Bunny and Allison worked hard to get everything organized. Over the course of planning the wedding, I discovered that there are exactly seventy-five thousand, two-hundred and twenty-nine decisions to be made. (I know because I counted each one of them.) We wanted the service to be a wonderful time of worship; we wanted the reception to be a joyful celebration. Since we wanted everyone in the church to feel welcome to come to the wedding, we decided to invite the whole congregation.

I can sympathize with the king in this parable who goes all out to throw a wedding banquet for his son. He wants the people to join in the celebration and to share his joy. He mobilizes his whole staff to prepare the wedding hall and the food for the feast. No expense is spared; no detail overlooked. Then, he sends word to the invited guests that everything is ready. Everyone has been waiting for the moment to arrive. Only, when the moment arises, the guests do not come. They have let other things get in the way. I have a friend who has made a point of missing every college reunion our class has ever had. In response to the last invitation he wrote, "I would love to come, but I will be terribly busy that weekend. My dog needs clipping; I have an ingrown toenail that needs to come out; the grass needs cutting; and I am sure I will need a nap by mid-afternoon." Jesus tells us, "They made light of it and went away, one to his farm and another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them."

They made light of his invitation. They act as if the wedding of the king's son is an insignificant event. Along the way, they had filled their time with other concerns and their minds with their own pursuits.

They let secondary concerns become the most important things in their lives. Some are even hostile. They are like the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. Moses is on the mountain with God receiving the Ten Commandments. Moses delays coming down; the people become anxious.

They forget God. They make light of what God has done for them. They want gods of their own making. They take the Lord's name in vain, for they count God as nothing.

The king's joy turns to rage. His troops destroy those who killed his slaves; he burns their city to the ground. Then he sends his servants out to invite other guests to the wedding. This time the invitation goes out to everyone-to the good and to the bad. Soon, the wedding hall is filled with guests.

We have always taken comfort in this image of God's gracious invitation to the wedding banquet. In the Scriptures, God's relationship with Israel and Jesus' relationship with the church are pictured as marriage relationships. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it says that the forsaken land shall be called "Beulah," which means "married." Paul speaks of the church as the bride of Christ. Revelation describes the marriage of heaven and earth, of Christ and the new Jerusalem. We hear how blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb. The wedding banquet in the parable points to the great messianic banquet at the end of time, when Christ returns and invites his people to the heavenly feast. At the feast, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, death shall be no more and sin and hatred shall be overcome. We are invited by God's grace alone.

In his novel, *Beach Music*, author Pat Conroy tells the story of the McCall family who are residents of small South Carolina low-country town. The McCalls, and, indeed, the whole town in which they live, struggle throughout the novel to come to terms with the terrors and wounds of the past. The mother of the family, Lucy McCall, is dying of cancer. Very near the end of her battle with cancer, her five sons throw a party for her. In a moment of grace, the whole town comes to the party. Far more people come than have received invitations. The good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the black and the white - all members of that small conflicted community come to the party. It is a kingdom moment when heaven and earth meet and the pain of the past is healed in the joy of human communion.

I think we would be happy if this parable were to end right there with the doors to the wedding hall flung open, the band playing "Amazing Grace," and the people eating homemade bread and drinking wine. They are talking, laughing and sharing the joy of the moment. But, the parable doesn't end there. It takes a strange turn. A guest is not wearing a wedding garment. The king asks the speechless man how he got in without being properly dressed for the wedding. He throws him out into the outer darkness.

How could the king expect someone from the streets, invited at the last minute, to have a wedding garment? These words mean something more than what they seem. In the Scriptures, there are images of being dressed and ready for what God is doing. There is an image of putting on Christ as one puts on a new garment. There is an image of the saints dressed in white robes that have been washed in the blood of the lamb. To be dressed suitably for the occasion is to demonstrate an awareness of what God has done. Isaiah says that God is the one who gives us the robe and makes us ready. "God has covered me with robes of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Is. 61:10) When the prodigal son comes home, the father rushes out to meet him and gives him the best robe in the house.

Jesus is saying that the grace of God changes us, clothes us with new life and invites a response.

Those who are dressed and ready are those whose lives manifest this gratitude for God's goodness. They do not take the grace of God for granted. Grace compels us to respond. We cannot say, "Yes," to God and go on living the same old way we lived before we knew God's grace. God expects something of us. God's grace leads to gratitude.

There is a delicate balance between God's grace and our grateful response. The Reformed theologian Brian Gerrish wrote a study of Calvin's theology entitled, "Grace and Gratitude." These two words capture the essence of this parable. The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of this heavenly banquet where grace and gratitude meet. To Calvin, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a visual presentation of the goodness and grace of God. In the sacrament, we receive Christ and all his benefits. In the feast, we see the Lord as the "fountain of all goodness." We respond to God's grace with gratitude. With grateful hearts, we offer our thanksgiving to God. The word "eucharist" means thanksgiving. Gerrish writes that the Sacrament is "in fact, the occasion for two acts of self-giving: Christ's giving of himself to the church and the church's giving of itself to God" (p 156). In the parable we see two acts of giving - the king's grace and the guest's gratitude.

Jan Karski was born in Poland. In the Second World War, he was a courier for the Polish underground. He was captured by the Nazis and later by the Soviets. He escaped from both. At one point, he was sent to the Warsaw Ghetto and to a concentration camp to give the outside world a report on what was happening. When he reached the United States, he spoke with President Roosevelt and other leaders. He wrote books on his experiences and then faded from sight until he was rediscovered by Elie Weisel. Karski was interviewed for the film, "Shoah." He told the interviewer that he had decided to speak again after many years of silence.

A new generation was living that did not believe such things could happen. He also said, "I believe there will be a last judgment, and God will say to me, 'Karski, I gave you a soul. Your body is gone, but your soul is mine. I gave it to you. What did you do with your soul?' And I will have to answer him." (Sermon by Mark Trotter, quoted in Lectionary Homiletics, Oct. 96).

To be fully human is to be a person who recognizes that all is grace and all is gratitude. The Christian life is not composed of 50% grace and 50% gratitude as if it takes gratitude to get into the party and to complete the grace. No, gratitude does not complete the grace. God's grace is sufficient and complete in itself. This same grace evokes a response in us. It leads us to gratitude. Gratitude is the only response worthy of grace. Grace makes us want to get dressed and be ready for the final feast of God. Gratitude leads to peace, generosity, faithfulness, hope and joy. In the Christian life, there is a delicate balance between grace and gratitude.

Years ago, I heard Marge Carpenter, a Presbyterian elder from Texas and Moderator of the General Assembly, speak to a church gathering. She told of a visit she made to Bosnia and Serbia with another former Moderator. The other Moderator was scheduled to preach in a Hungarian Reformed Church in Serbia, but they could not get visas. Their Hungarian host asked them if they still wanted to go to this church in the small Serbian town. They said that they did, but they didn't have the necessary visas. The host replied that he didn't say anything about visas, but did they still want to go?

On Saturday, the host drove them across the border into the small Serbian town where the congregation would be waiting for them. They arrived in pitch black darkness, because the electricity that supplied the town had been cut off. It was forbidden for the church to ring

the bell to invite people to worship or to advertise itself in any other way. In the darkness, they drove up one street and down another looking for the church. The longer it took to find the church, the more dangerous their situation became. They decided that if they didn't find the church on the next street, they would have to go back. As they turned the corner, they saw a group of people holding candles in the street showing them the way to the church. In the morning, they woke to no heat and five degree weather. They walked to the church from the homes in which they were staying. On the way to the church, they heard the church bell ringing to invite the whole town to their celebration of worship. Marge Carpenter asked us, "What if we had decided to give up and turn back? So grateful were those Christians in Serbia for the grace of God that I believe they would have stood there all night in the cold and dark waiting for us with their candles lighting our way to the church."

Something holy happens every time we celebrate together, serve together, give to those in need or even have a cup of coffee with a friend. In large and small ways we partake in the great grace-filled feast of God. This grace changes us and we give thanks with grateful hearts.

When the time for our daughter's wedding arrived, we gathered at the church and made sure that everything was ready for the wedding guests. The church was filled with friends from far and wide. The bagpipe and organ processional began. Our beautiful daughter was leaning on my arm.

We entered the church and saw a sanctuary filled with people we knew and loved, whose lives had been woven together with our lives in countless ways across many years. Two words seemed to capture the feelings of the moment: grace and gratitude. We were all there by the grace of God, gathered together as family and friends and as the people of God. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for this life that God has given us and for that moment with my daughter, her husband to be, my wife, our boys, our family and our friends. We were dressed and ready for the moment. This life is a delicate balance in which everything depends on grace and everything good we do flows out of our gratitude to God.