

Exodus 32

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods[a] who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

2 Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 He collected them and tied them up in a cloth.[b] Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!" 6 They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! 8 They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" 9 The Lord said to Moses, "I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. 10 Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

11 But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, "Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" 14 Then the Lord changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Loved ones, 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are

in the scroll of life.

4 Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! 5 Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. 6 Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. 7 Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

8 From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. 9 Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 22

Jesus responded by speaking again in parables: 2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. 3 He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn't want to come. 4 Again he sent other servants and said to them, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Look, the meal is all prepared. I've butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything's ready. Come to the wedding party!" ' 5 But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. 6 The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them.

7 "The king was angry. He sent his soldiers to destroy those murderers and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding party is prepared, but those who were invited weren't worthy. 9 Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of town and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.'

10 "Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests. 11 Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn't wearing wedding clothes. 12 He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' But he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to his servants, 'Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.'

14 "Many people are invited, but few people are chosen."

Sermon

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.

Lord, open our hearts and our lives will sing out your name: Amen.

Once a pastor announces her departure, a few tendencies can arise in worship. Sometimes sermons become elaborate goodbyes, moving almost entirely away from Scripture. We're not going to do that. At other times, you'll find worship totally ignoring the upcoming change in the congregation's life. We're not going to do that either. I've even seen a few pastors, leaving on not the best of terms, use this time to unleash on the congregation years of pent up critique. We're most certainly not going to do that!

Over these next seven weeks, we will stay grounded in the biblical witness of God's love and care for us and all creation. There's no better words that I can offer you than the Word of God. Following the lead of the Bible through the lectionary, I'll also

address the last encouragements, prayers, convictions, and hopes I have as your pastor.

You might wonder, as I do, why the king in Jesus's parable has his undies in such a bunch. After all, he sent servants to the outskirts of town to invite all people, good and evil, to attend the wedding. Yet, when the king encounters one of the attendees without wedding clothes, he reacts harshly. Is this unfair? Unjust? It's intense, to be sure, but it's not unexpected. There's a vast difference between the good news of an invitation and the associated expectations.

Let's get a few things out of the way. First, this isn't a parable about clothes. Too many times you'll hear someone use this parable as a proof text to force their respectability dress code on people so that church becomes a culturally homogenous oatmeal rather than a diverse, delicious brunch. It's definitely not that. It's a parable and remember that parables are stories of common

knowledge used as an analogy or metaphor to make a point about God or spirituality. So this parable uses clothes to talk about the content of our character and the status of our preparation when we respond to God's gift of grace. Jesus isn't trying to force people to wear certain types of dress to worship. Jesus is telling us to prepare ourselves to meet God, to respond to message of grace with intention, and that there's consequences for being unprepared.

Also, notice that the parable doesn't tell us this person without wedding clothes was good or evil. It just says they're unprepared. It could be any of us. This isn't a parable meant to caricature outsiders and reinforce comfort among the religious establishment. No, it's meant to awaken our awareness to the rare and radical invitation to new life that we receive in Jesus. The parable doesn't leave room for any of us to escape the reality that

we often respond to Jesus's invitation with nonchalance, if not downright carelessness.

I'll never forget one worship gig I was playing in high school. I'd just berated my then girlfriend for being unprepared. I laid it on thick, emphasizing how being unprepared didn't just affect how she performed but affected the ability of the whole band to succeed and the worship experience of the congregation. Now, to be sure, I said all this because it was true and important. Then I went to set up my drums, and guess who forgot the hardware that I needed to keep my kit standing. We're so often poised to critique others that we forget we're just as likely to falter. I was the one that day who let down the band and the church because I was unprepared. There are consequences for our unpreparedness.

Of course, when we offer invitations to other people, we also have expectations attached. Sometimes they're explicit, like a dress code for a Black Tie gala. Sometimes they're unspoken, like

the expectation you'd be gentle when a mother asks if you want to hold her newborn. We offer invitations and expect them to have expectations. And so, if we break those expectations, we refuse the invitation itself. Showing up to to the Grammys in ripped jean shorts, a flannel with the sleeves cut off, and a Keystone Light trucker hat you won at the latest cornhole tournament at your local bar certainly denies you entry to the party.

Here's another story of my screwups. One afternoon, Michelle and I were at the home of our friends, the Bakers. I was used to playing with my godsons, who knew me and trusted me and loved to play games that involved being thrown up in the air, onto furniture, into the water. They liked to fly. Well, Adam and Jenn Baker's middle daughter, Adelaide, was enjoying being thrown in the air, and they had a big fluffy couch, so in my mind, I thought, "She must enjoy being tossed onto furniture as well." So, I did just that. Except, she didn't at all enjoy it. Though she wasn't

hurt - just scared that this dude she barely knew tossed her - I effectively refused the invitation they offered by ignoring the expectations of Adelaide's trust. Fortunately, Adam and Jenn are graceful, and Adelaide's indestructible determination led to quick reconciliation. But what I discovered then was not just the necessity of preparation, but the value of attending to the invitation itself.

We might feel compassion for this unprepared wedding guest, so much so that we want to interpret our way out of the consequences s/he faces. But they knew they were invited to a wedding. The invitation was specifically to the party for the wedding and it was from a host who was dissatisfied with the previous guest list because they weren't worthy. The guest without wedding attire prepared for this wedding no more than those who ignored the invitation or harassed the messenger.

Invitations come with expectations and divine invitations entail spiritual expectations. This parable is perhaps the strongest critique against any spirituality that says, *Oh, I know I shouldn't do that*, whatever that is, mind you, *but Jesus forgives me anyway*.

That belittles the magnitude of the gift and the difficulty God faces in giving it. God in Christ chose a road through suffering and death in order to bring us an invitation to new life. If we ignore that message, or if we respond to that with a lack of preparation, then we've decisively belittled the cross and the grave of Jesus.

Now, despite the severity of the parable, we should not hear this as a threat. Again, remember that parables not literal devices, so God's not going to bind you hand and foot and throw you to the darkness. The story of the Israelites, as they build the golden calf after God's invited them to a wonderful new way of life through the 10 Commandments, is instructive. Their disobedience grieves God's heart. Moses reminds God that destruction is not at the

heart of this new covenant God offered. The verses that follow our reading in Exodus reveal that this broken covenant - worshipping a lifeless statue instead of the living God - leads to a much more difficult journey toward the Promised Land. The Israelites still get there, but they wander in the wilderness for 40 years, almost as if clouded by darkness and tripped up by shackles. Because they disregarded God's invitation, they found a much more difficult path to the new life God offers.

That, it seems, is the wisdom of this parable. Respond to God's invitation with intention. With preparation. With appreciation. If you mistreat the invitation, God still wants you at the celebration for new life, but your way of getting there will be fraught with difficulty.

So, as CLC prepares for the next steps as a congregation - decisions on how to spend resources, what ministries to focus on, what staff needs you have, who you might partner with in order to

call a new pastor - don't put any of that ahead of God's gift of new life. New life enables all of that to happen, which is excellent, but don't ignore the absolute base reason we are here: God has invited us to salvation, as individuals and as a community, and so together we're called first to properly respond to that gift. We do that not by what we wear to worship, but worshipping authentically. We do that not by seeking fame for ourselves, but by serving others and meeting the needs of those who suffer. We do that not by fixing a building, or marketing our brand, or getting our needs met, but instead growing in the image of God as individuals and as a community. Do you want to know how to respond properly to God's gift of grace? See the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The more we look, live, and love like Jesus, the more we respond to the very heart of God. Amen.