

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:1-14

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My best friend growing up was a kid named Brett. We were close, for a long time, from the first time I stepped on a soccer field to being best man at each other's weddings. We still talk from time to time, though with less regularity and an always widening gap between who we used to be together and who we are now. That's not a bad thing, necessarily, it's just what happens. Which is why the story I'll tell this morning means so much to me. See, growing up in Arkansas, being an Episcopalian was a very strange thing indeed. Folks knew what a Baptist was, so much so that they knew the difference between a First, Second, and Eagle Heights kind of Baptist. They knew what Church of Christ meant; they knew what Mennonite meant; they even knew what Catholic meant. To most folks, "Catholic" meant a sort of exotic pseudo-Christianity with more than a hint of evil sprinkled in. But hardly anybody knew what Episcopalian meant. Brett was a Baptist, as were most of the church-going kids that went to my school. The Baptist Church that he went to had a massive youth group. I'm talking an entire building set aside for youth ministry with multiple basketball courts, a track, volleyball, video games -- all the trappings a kid could want. And as you'd get older, you'd realize that other interesting kids were gathering there, too. The boy you wanted to be just like, the girl you had a crush on, the best friend who played drums in the worship band, and the kinda dorky kid that was suddenly really cool 'cause he got a car for his birthday, which meant, after Youth Group, you could pile in his two-door sedan with nineteen other kids to go wreak havoc at Wal*Mart. Yeah, those Baptists know how to party.

Well, anyway, I basically was the entire Youth Group at my little Episcopal Church, so I'd pile in somebody's car to go hang out with the Baptists, something that, more often than not, felt more like crossing party lines than going to worship. I tried, y'all, I really did. I sang off the projector screen, I raised my hands, I even answered an altar call when the unbearable silence weighed heavy on my back and on my heart. One evening, after pizza and volleyball and a particularly compelling talk by the youth pastor, we made our way into the big worship space typically used only on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. We spread out, friends sitting close in clumps, a few stragglers dotting pews all the way to the back. There was more music, but different now, more of a steady, contemplative drone, repetitive, meditative, even, though I didn't have the word for that yet.

Another pastor, one that hung around, but usually didn't talk much, took a microphone and in a very gentle voice, asked us to kneel in our pews, and close our eyes, and think about what Jesus wants for the world, and more to the point, what he wants from each one of us. "Have you done that? Have you really done that? Have you lived like Jesus asked?" he nearly whispered. The music and the microphone carried that whisper into my head in waves. I really couldn't tell you if he said the same, or similar things, over and over, but it felt that way. Those words echoed throughout my being. And the room stayed silent for a long time. The major chord drone carried on, and I heard someone begin to cry a few pews behind. The pastor's whispered message changed, and he gently invited anyone that felt moved to do so to come find a worship leader; they'd be stationed at the front and along the walls, and if you really needed to talk, there were a couple more in a room off to one side that could hear what was weighing heavy on your heart. But find a worship leader, and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Accept him into your heart. And change your life.

There had to be seventy-five of us kids in that room, most of us actually following the rules and waiting with our eyes closed and knees growing tired. I heard a few move around, either shifting their weight for the long haul or standing to find one of those worship leaders scattered around the room, but it wasn't many. Apparently, this was noticeable to the worship leaders, too, because that same gentle, whispered voice came through, again. And this time it was a little more direct. "What if this was the last time you had a chance to accept Jesus, and you missed it? Don't you want to be ready?" Now, I didn't know what I was supposed to be

ready for, and this was all *very* different from anything we'd ever done at good ol' St. John's, but I did feel something in the room change. More shifting, footfalls for sure this time, and I began to wonder if I was the only kid left kneeling while everyone else lined up to invite Jesus into their hearts. I have to admit, when I opened my eyes, it felt more like giving into perceived peer pressure than it did a religious conversion. Though, I suppose God can work through whatever means God chooses, so who knows?

Regardless, I opened my eyes and stood, feeling those knees of mine creak into place. I stood, and leaned on the pew back in front of me while the blood circulated to my toes again. I kept my eyes down, out of shame for taking so long to stand and respect for those more shameful, or at least slower to stand. But when I finally looked up, I was surprised to see that most of the room was still kneeling. Most of the worship leaders were with someone, but there weren't any lines stretching out to Kingdom Come. A good harvest, but not plentiful. I even felt a little sting of embarrassment when I saw that the girl I had a crush on was still in her pew; I was embarrassed, not because I was afraid she'd see me doing this vulnerable thing, but because I saw that she was still crying, tears that it seemed she didn't want anyone else to see. I tore my eyes from her lament, whatever it was, and walked up to the gentle-voiced pastor. I knelt in front of him and made that same confession and invited Jesus into my heart. And you know what, I felt something. I really did. Relief, I think it was, and the rest of the night just felt different somehow. Like, lighter but also more confusing, like what am I supposed to do now? What's changed? How then shall I live?

Funny thing is, I remembered taking Jesus into my being every Sunday at the Episcopal Church. I remembered my confirmation classes and vaguely recalled a guy in a pointy hat putting his hands on my head. But this was new. I didn't really know why we didn't do something like this, but I also could never imagine it happening at St. John's. I knew this was a Baptist thing, or at least not an Episcopal thing, that I'd done, and I knew it felt different, but I wasn't sure what, exactly, it meant. I just knew that it was finished. Except, a few times a semester at those volleyball and pizza youth groups, a few times a semester, the stage would get set again. The second time it happened, was basically just like the first, complete with me finally standing up and inviting Jesus in, again. But that felt different from the first time, pro forma almost. I certainly didn't feel a change or even a blip. And the next time we were escorted into that room, I stayed in my pew. And the next time it happened was the last time I went. Something in the room, or more probably, something in my heart shifted. It stopped feeling compelling and began to feel manipulative. And I got mad at myself and that gentle-voiced pastor and even my best friend for all that happened there. It felt like something so sacred as Jesus had been twisted around to make kids being kids feel bad about being kids.

And the truth is, I think I'm still working through the baggage of that confession. Brought on by scripture readings like this one where, through a parable, Jesus seems to be recounting the history of God's People and their relationship with God. The way this normally gets broken down is something like this: God is the King, the People of God are the first folks invited to the Wedding Banquet, and the Banquet is the Kingdom of God. God extends the invitation, God's People reject it, and then other folks are invited in to take their place. Oh, and that one guy that gets rejected at the end, he gets tossed out because he wasn't really ready. It's like the words of the gentle-voiced pastor and his altar call: "What if this was the last time you had a chance to accept Jesus, and you missed it? Don't you want to be ready?" And sure, yes, you want to be ready. Live as Christ instructed in all things, at all times. Strive for this and, when you fall short, keep striving.

But that's not the message this group really professed. See, I left out some bits of the story for the sake of tidiness that matter. I was always suspect in that space. For one, I was Episcopalian, and everyone knew that, no matter what I said or did there, I'd go back to that unknown place on Sunday mornings and whatever they believed. For another, I had very long hair, a stark contrast to the clean-cut look so many of the other guys wore. But that was fairly minor. My best friend, Brett, had been grounded for a couple of months by then

because he'd gotten a 'B' on his report card, which was a transgression against the Commandment to "Honor thy father and mother." Until he could show his parents that honor, the pastors restricted what he could do at Youth Group. The guy playing that major chord drone was the second string guitar player for the worship band; he only played that week because there were rumors going around about the usual guitar player that brought shame on the youth group. And the girl crying in the pew, there were rumors about her, too; and they grew harmful enough that she stopped coming, rather, she was banned from coming. She came out publicly a few years later, and while I can't say this for certain, I suspect her shame-filled tears that soaked that lonely pew every couple of months, I suspect her tears had something to do with that.

Now, there are other ways to read this parable. It's written just ambiguously enough to leave some room. Right at the beginning, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of Heaven *may* be compared to this" not "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this." And in that "may," there's some room to open things up. Jesus may be saying something to the effect of "You might hear the Kingdom of Heaven described like this" and maybe you will. I certainly did growing up. But just because you hear it described that way, that painfully strict and exclusive, doesn't mean it is that way. You may have heard that God's Kingdom is an exclusive club meant for those that have it all exactly right. But it's not. It's for those folks that weren't ready for anything. It's for those folks that don't have much of anything figured it out at all. It's not meant to shame, it's meant to hold in a gentle embrace, like a hen gathering chicks under her wings. There's a place set aside for kids doing kid things; there's a place set aside for falling short; there's a place set aside for difference, for a queer kid, for an imperfect parent, even for long hair and bad grades.

Just before I moved here, I was invited back to my hometown to give a talk at the first Pride Parade my hometown had ever held. It was a majorly contentious thing, complete with a newspaper article that sent a rift through my family, condemnations from area churches (including that same church that gave me space to invite Jesus into my heart), and threats from the local chapter of the KKK. When Brett, my childhood best friend, read the paper and saw that I was coming to town for this reason, he called me up and asked if we could meet for breakfast before everything started. We met in our favorite old diner, ate bacon and biscuits drowning in chocolate gravy, and caught up on each other's lives. He picked up the check and then asked if he could pray with me, and y'all, it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever experienced. Beside a busy road with roaring semis and trucks burning coal, Brett put his hand on my shoulder and prayed in that cracked parking lot. And he prayed that I would be safe, and protected, and that no one would do anything stupid while vulnerable people gathered. He even prayed that, while we disagreed, that God would see the faith of the people there and hold it and help it to grow. Y'all, I wept. Because what I saw and felt in that moment was my dear friend's faith rising above the shame instilled in him and the judgment he was asked to carry. He didn't want to throw anyone out, he just wanted God to be known, even in a place he couldn't abide himself. It was one of the single most mature moments of faith I've ever witnessed. And that's what God's Kingdom is about. It's not about agreement. It's not about standardization. It's not about perfection. It's about love, it's about welcome, and it's about an abundance of space set aside for broken, shamed, imperfect people. That's an altar call I can get behind, a Jesus I'm relieved to invite in, a Kingdom I long to serve.