28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle A, 10.15.17
Isaiah 25:6-10/Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20/
Matthew 22:1-14

LIFE’S A BANQUET – DON’T MISS IT!

Have you seen the movie “Wedding Crashers? Clergy are the original “wedding crashers” – or at least we feel that way given the number of weddings at which we preside and the receptions we’re invited to. A few years ago I was invited to attend a wedding here in Lafayette. I wasn’t officiating at it; I was a guest at the ceremony being held at the Lafayette Park Hotel, followed by the wedding banquet. The family asked if I would come and offer a blessing prayer at the dinner. Since I had to rush to get there immediately following the Saturday evening Mass here, I didn’t pay too close attention when I got to the hotel, signed the guest book with the feathered white pen and hurried to find a seat in the hotel’s outdoor courtyard where the ceremony was being held.

I smiled at the couple next to me as I took an empty seat. I didn’t know them. In fact, as I looked around, I didn’t recognize any of the people in attendance. And then, as it got closer to the starting time, I saw the parents of the bride being escorted to their front row seats. The parents were the ones who invited me, but I didn’t recognize these people either. Turns out, I was in the wrong courtyard. The ceremony I was supposed to be at was in another courtyard. So, I slinked out of my chair, smiled again at the couple next to me, and tried to demurely go out the back exit, high-tailing it to the hotel desk to find out exactly where I was supposed to be. Can you imagine the surprise of the first wedding couple when they went through their guest book weeks after the celebration and saw the name, Rev. John Kasper, OSFS, on the list and wondered – “Who the heck is he?” and “Who invited him?”

Matthew’s gospel paints a rather far-fetched picture of people who tried to get out of a wedding party. Not only did they not bother to RSVP, but they killed the postman who brought the invitations. Doesn’t make much sense, does it? Nor does the overreaction of the king who sends in troops to kill the inconsiderate guests and burn down their town. Remember, though, as you’re scratching your head and trying to put the pieces together that it’s a parable, a story that Jesus is telling. Parables are meant to jolt the listener. And if a story doesn’t have some juicy or funny or scary parts, it’s not going to catch people’s attention. And Jesus certainly had their attention with this story. Hopefully, he’s caught your attention too because there are some very important aspects of our faith being revealed in this somewhat absurd parable.

A Difficult Parable
Matthew 22:1-14

First of all, we’re reminded that life is a banquet to which we are invited. Recall
the words of Psalm 23 we just heard: The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. You have spread the table before me in the sight of my foes. And the Prophet Isaiah tells us that God will provide a feast - not just “rich food and choice wine,” but juicy, rich foods and pure, choice wines. The metaphor of a wedding banquet or feast is often used in the scriptures to describe God’s deepest desire for us and for our happiness, not just in heaven, at some future time, but right here, right now. Only a fool or an ingrate would refuse such wonderful things freely set before him. Yet, how often we take the gift of each day for granted, never once stopping to say “Thanks” to the God who is the Giver of it all. There’s a scene from the musical Mame where she tells her secretary, Agnes Gooch: Oh, Agnes! Here you’ve been taking my dictations for weeks and you haven’t gotten the message of my book: Live! Bewildered, Gooch asks: Live? Yes! Mame says: Live! Life’s a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death! Oscar Wilde expressed the same: To live is the rarest thing in the world; Most people just exist!

So, don’t let life pass you by. Look in the mirror once in a while and ask yourself: Do I look like someone who’s enjoying life, even with all its pitfalls and detours? If not, ask yourself what you need to change your perspective. Take encouragement from the words of St. Paul today: I know how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry and of being in need. What’s Paul’s secret? I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me. Paul had such a passion for God’s Kingdom, that the external circumstances of his life, the positive and the negative, the successes and the failures, couldn’t stop him from seeing all of life as a gift, every day a day of grace – amazing grace. Just think of the folks in Napa and Sonoma. The owner of one winery said: We will rebuild as soon as we’re allowed to return. Another fire victim said: I survived because the fire inside me burned brighter than the fire around me.

The second point that Matthew is making in his re-shaping of this parable is how expansive God’s Kingdom invitation is. The servants are told to go into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever they find – good and bad alike. The lesson for the early Church was clear. Salvation was meant for all people, not for a narrow group. The official leaders, who wanted a stranglehold on God’s grace, were not to be heeded or trusted. God’s feast is to be shared with all who are hungry and humble of heart and willing to respond to his invitation. Grace is freely given and freely received. The prevailing attitude of their leaders was not to be followed unquestioningly. While our world is all about division and distinction – Sunni versus Shiite, Jew against Palestinian, white
against black, gay versus straight, rich versus poor – God’s world, the kingdom to which he calls us, breaks down barriers and washes away whatever separates us one from another.

This is what our Eucharistic gathering is all about – all God’s people gathered from near and far, brothers and sisters at one table. Our Mass is meant to be a foretaste of that heavenly banquet and we are invited – required – to do all that we can on our part to let this encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist unite us as members of his Body. As the King went out to highways and byways to fill the banquet hall with good and bad alike, we have to ask ourselves: Who is missing from our feast? Then, by the unspoken example of our lives as well as by direct invitation, we call others to be nourished at this feast and to celebrate the goodness of God who has spread a table before us.

One last note on today’s gospel. We all feel sorry for the poor schlep who was dragged into the wedding feast, but then kicked out because he didn’t have a proper wedding garment. If you’re puzzled by that, you should be. It doesn’t make much sense. However, in light of our baptism it does. When a baby is baptized the child is clothed in a white garment – that’s our wedding garment for the feast of the Kingdom of God. The prayer that accompanies it says: You have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in the white garment you wear the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With the help of your family and friends bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. Once we’ve accepted the invitation to the feast of the Kingdom we have a responsibility to “wear the proper garment” – that is, to live each day with faith, hope and love, open to God’s grace and willing to open the door to all who are hungry, all who are hurting and all who are in need of God’s mercy.

John Kasper, osfs