

**Sermon – October 12, 2014:** All Saints-by-the-Sea, Santa Barbara, CA  
**-- Marni McGee**

Readings: Proper 23, Year A: Psalm 23; Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:4-13;  
Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-14

Good morning.

My invitation to preach today has been “advertised” as a sermon by “our own Marni McGee.” That has made me happy! I like belonging to you. And so, I am both grateful and honored to do so – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Among my fondest childhood memories are regular family dinners. Far more important than the food itself was the joy of being safely gathered as a family, sharing the day’s events. Sitting around the table, my siblings and I heard stories – family stories. I especially loved hearing about the naughty children among our relatives. One of my favorites was about a little boy who was the son of a Foot-Washing Baptist preacher in Georgia. This little fellow had a vivid imagination, and he hatched a delightfully wicked plan. One Saturday night when nobody was looking, he snatched his father’s boots – the ones his Papa always wore to church. He scooped ashes from the fireplace and carefully poured them into his father’s shoes. The next day, completely oblivious, the preacher pulled on his boots and marched off through the woods to church. Everything went smoothly until time for the Foot-Washing, which was, as you know, a holy moment. The

congregation was hushed. The Deacon knelt at the Preacher's feet. Not a word was spoken. The Deacon pulled off the parson's boots. Lo and behold: the pastor's big bare feet were black as sin, covered with soot!

Imagine the hilarity. But what happened next? After the benediction, a stony-faced preacher led his son to the woodshed for the punishment that he had so royally earned. But he couldn't do it. Picturing the scene, he started to laugh. He laughed so hard that punishment was simply no longer an option. The boy got off with a stern warning: "This will only be funny **once!**" the preacher declared, and then father and son walked home through the woods, together.

Another family story brings to life my great-great grandmother when she was newly widowed. Grandmother came down to breakfast one morning, absolutely glowing. "Children," she declared, "when I die, don't wear black for me. I've just had a visit-dream with Papa, and it's beautiful there, where he is. My darlings, don't wear black for me, for there will be no call for grief."

Grandmother's experience holds to my eye a telescope trained upon the Kingdom of Heaven – not just what it will be somewhere, sometime in the future, but what it can be now when, in moments of purest grace, when we are open to the spiritual realm – when, for a time, we no longer live in two separate worlds. In these moments, the Ordinary is merged with the Holy. Not two worlds, but one.

You and I come to our family dining room, here, for many of the same reasons: to be together and to hear our family stories told – stories about Jesus and his disciples, stories about Abraham, Sara, Rachel, Moses, Elijah, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene. With prophets, saints, apostles and martyrs, these are the forebears of our faith. Their stories belong to our family. Many of Jesus' stories take place around a table, as does our Gospel reading this morning. Set in the context of a wedding feast, it comes from the Gospel writer whom we will, for convenience, call Matthew. We don't actually know the writer's name, only that he was part of a Christian community founded by Matthew the Apostle, almost a century earlier. His Gospel reflects Matthew's version of what Jesus said and did. Scholars tell us that the writer was a second generation Christian who lived in Antioch, Syria, in the late first century A.D. And so, like us, he was not contemporary with Jesus, in the literal sense. He was, rather, a spiritual descendant of the Apostle.

When I first approached this Gospel passage as a text, I confess I found it rather daunting and strange. I was especially puzzled by the ending, where one of the wedding guests is bound hand-and-foot and tossed into outer darkness because he wasn't properly dressed. In this parable, Jesus tells about a king who prepares a lavish wedding feast for his son. The king has gone all-out! His minions have slaughtered the oxen and killed the fatted calves. The musicians are prepared; their instruments are tuned. The hall is decorated, and everything is ready. Now

the guests must be invited, and the king sends his servants out to do so. But the guests refuse to come. They protest they have other things to do, other pressing business. They are concerned with the things of this world. Ordinary time consumes them, while Special time eludes them, and they reject the invitation. Perhaps we can relate. How often do we fill our lives with the mundane, the practical, and the trivial – squeezing God out? I certainly do. “Not right now,” we say. “I have other things I need to do.”

Ultimately, the would-be guests kill the king’s servants. The king avenges the deaths of his servants, but then he does something astonishing. He sends more servants out. This time he tells them to go into the streets and byways to gather different guests. Never mind if they’re good or bad, rich or poor. The king opens his doors and his heart: “Bring them all in,” he says. “Fill the banqueting hall.”

Matthew tells us to read this story as a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven – casting light on an extraordinary moment in history when God invites people to share in the fullness of his joy through the wedding feast of his beloved Son. He reminds us that God first offered the invitation to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles. To us. The story is, simultaneously, an allegory about how the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus. The Gospel writer, whose Christian community in Syria included Gentiles, is explaining why the Good News of Jesus was, and is, offered to anyone who will accept it, not just the Jews.

This richly layered story is firmly grounded in first century marriage customs, which were, of course, markedly different from our own. In Jewish society at this time, marriages were arranged. Fathers with marriageable children would agree to a match and draw up a contract. The young people might not actually meet until the contract was signed. Though the marriage was legal at that point, the two would not yet live together as husband and wife, not until their home was made ready by the groom. Only then would he collect his bride. Only then would the religious ceremony take place, followed immediately by a grand banquet. The wedding guests would be invited at the last minute!

The groom's father would provide white linen robes for all the guests to wear. This robe symbolized purity, righteousness, and joy. To refuse to wear it would be a serious insult, and if the host happened to be a king, it would constitute an act of sedition. The guest in our story who is thrown out into the darkness has done exactly that. He has rejected the robe provided by his host, asserting his independence: "Take me as I am!" Rather than accepting the king's gift, he trusts in his own righteousness. In a parallel way, God provides a robe of righteousness for each of us – the robe of Christ's righteousness. To accept it and wear it is to embrace the teachings of Jesus and his radically loving way of life.

Matthew portrays Christ as a bridegroom. So – if Christ is the bridegroom, who then is his bride? In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul proclaims that the Church is the Bride of Christ. This means that we are not only the guests at the

banquet, we are also simultaneously the bride – the Bride of Christ. You and I. If we take that seriously, it surely means that we must live united, one with another, bound by Christ’s love for us and by our love for Him. It doesn’t mean that we have to agree about everything. Agreement on issues is not required at the Holy Banquet. Love is the only requirement.

In 2003, our son married Eriko, a lovely young woman from Japan. Their wedding was held in Santa Barbara. That summer, eleven members of her family flew from southern Japan to attend the ceremony and the feasts that followed. This was the first time we’d met Eriko’s family, and for most of them, their first visit to America. Indeed, for Eriko’s 80-year-old grandmother, it was her first time to fly. But fly they all did – to a county with whom their country had once been at war. At dinner on our first night together, our merging families sat around the table and began to reach out to one another, telling our stories as best we could, though only a few of us spoke the same language. My husband and I were amazed when Eriko’s parents told us that theirs had been an arranged marriage. Her father seemed pleased by our surprise, but then he said something that I shall never forget. He said: “Our marriage was arranged by our parents, but now – I am her oxygen. She is my air.”

What better description of marriage could there be? I believe that these words describe the true marriage of Christ and his Church. My friends, in a little while, when we exchange the Peace, I will be remembering the spirit of

Mitsuyuki's words, changing them just a bit to say: "You, my friends – you are my oxygen. Christ is the air that we breathe."

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After the Peace, we will share the Eucharistic Feast. Let us go to the Table this morning with hearts filled to overflowing with love for Christ Jesus. Let us go to the altar, not with judgments of any kind, but with love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Franciscan theologian, Fr. Richard Rohr speaks of the mystery inherent in the Eucharist, containing as it does, great love *and* great suffering, "which are," he says, "the only things strong enough to take away our pretentiousness and our illusions. They are our avenues to the Real," and the Real is Christ Jesus himself. So, let us eat the Holy Meal together, in one-ness. Let us go with joy, echoing the words of the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." *Amen.*