

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
October 15, 2017
Matthew 22:1-14

I wasn't raised with TV, and Jim and I raised our own family without TV, so the world of TV is relatively foreign to me. Even though I can now access TV shows on my computer, I rarely feel drawn to watch TV; frankly, I'd rather read, do one of my crafts, or honestly, go to bed and sleep!

But life is interesting; if you let it, it takes you to your stubborn edges and wears you down to open you to new possibilities.

Staying up in Nanoose with Bill and Jan, for 2 nights a week this past year and a half has opened my eyes to the pleasures of TV. I'm learning about sports I knew nothing about a year ago. The Blue Jays? Is that a naturalist group? The Oilers? Is that hockey or football? You get the picture!

And recently, I was introduced to the series "Dance with the Stars," and I'm hooked! I love it. To see people step out of their comfort zone and learn to dance.... in public, no less! I find it inspiring. No one makes the contestants do it. They join the contest knowing that every move- or misstep- they make is on show for the world to see; knowing that their dancing will be critiqued in front of thousands - well, millions - of viewers; and knowing there's a very high chance they will be eliminated as the show progresses.

Yet they “step out” and try something new, in the partnership of a professional dancer who develops a dance that highlights their abilities and expands them. Amazing! And exciting to watch.

In the confession we make most weeks (not today!) we say the following words – “we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and *by what we have left undone.*” It can be difficult to think of what we have not done; of what we have failed to do. How do you remember a “not”? Our omissions can be easy to forget, or can they?

Speaking of dancing, I remember attending the recital of our youngest son’s fiddle orchestra. The teacher had rented a local hall for the young musicians to perform. I had been racing around all day and arrived home just in time to whip together dinner, serve it, and put together the requisite treat to contribute to the evening’s event. I didn’t really have time to change. I just pulled a brush through my hair. “Don’t forget your music!” I called as we raced out the door. Theo tuned up with his fellow students and the music began. The rhythm was lively and people started clapping. “We rented this hall so you could dance,” announced the teacher between songs. People got up to dance. I looked down at my shoes. I had on my schleppy oversized, step-into-shoes. No way I was dancing in those shoes! I’d sprain my ankle. So I stayed on the sidelines all night, clapping and swaying to the music. Afterwards, Theo said, “Why didn’t you dance?” and I could see the disappointment on his face. I tried to reassure him that I had felt like it but had worn the wrong footwear. But he was quiet on the drive home. And I regretted not having prepared myself

properly for his special night. I still regret not having danced to my son's music.

I had not prepared for my son's special evening. And worse, I hadn't been willing to kick off my shoes and jump onto the dance floor, not caring what others would think.

Next week is "Live like a Stoic" week. I've agreed to participate with Jim as he leads his philosophy students through it.

In preparing to join in, I did some reading on the website. On the home page is a picture of the statue of Marcus Aurelius. A Roman philosopher who died in 180 AD, he was also the last of the so-called "five good emperors." He was a practitioner of Stoicism and his untitled writing, commonly known as *Meditations*, is a significant source of our modern understanding of ancient Stoic philosophy, one of the greatest works of philosophy.

Marcus Aurelius expressed this *lack of preparation or willingness to participate* in this way. "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." Do we live a safe life, one where we avoid challenges, love, delight and engagement? Or do we step out in faith, ready to receive and enjoy all God offers us? Are we reckless like God, sharing all we have? Taking time to feast with friends and strangers? Taking time to celebrate and give thanks? Or are we pious and rigid? Concerned more with how others view us, than with our relationship with God?

Today's gospel reading is a challenging one. But I believe it deals with exactly this theme. Jesus uses one of his favourite

analogies to describe our relationship, or lack of, to God, and to the life God offers us. He uses a wedding to talk about the abundance and generosity of God. And how if we really perceived the life that God offers and invites us into, we wouldn't be able to resist celebrating and enjoying life to the fullest.

God sends His son to be in relationship with us. He proposes a celebration of this amazing event. A wedding. Now you have to think about what a wedding would be like in Jesus' day. It was time off from the rigours of daily life, it was cause for celebration; it was time to remember God's generosity; it built community; there was music, dancing, eating, drinking..... and, it went on for days!! It was a sabbath event, a community event, when the people together could rest from their labours and celebrate that life, with all its difficulties, was good. God was good. And life would go on through the two young people making a covenant with each other and with God.

So knowing all this, who would, in their right mind, refuse to attend a wedding? It was unheard of. Especially a *royal* wedding! Where the celebration would be exceptionally lavish; and anyone who was anybody would want to show up. But those invited, refuse to come!

So right away, this is a strange story.

The king then sends his slaves to re-issue the invitation, describing, in detail, the feast that will be served.

More strange behaviour: some blow off the invitation, others go off to deal with business as usual. And yet others, kill the messengers after mistreating them. Whoa!!

How many of us are unchanged by the generosity and abundance of God's nature? How many focus on and value our daily life and business concerns instead on our relationship with God?

Back to the story..... the king responds with rage. He destroys those who murder his messengers and burns down their city.

In this, Matthew seems to infer that there are consequences for those who refuse the life God is offering through Jesus. A punitive God. We don't like to imagine that!

Back to the story again.

The wedding is still on!! Imagine that!! After all that has happened, the king is determined to celebrate and has his messengers go beyond the guest list to bring in *anyone* who will come; the good and the bad.... they are all invited.

In the Gospel of Luke, this same parable ends at this point – with the wedding hall full of guests, unlikely guests, but guests just the same. And in Luke's account, the parable focuses on the multitude of excuses people make for refusing to enter into life with God.

Matthew does something different with this parable.

Matthew uses Jesus' parable to show the history of salvation. God has put up with the killing of His prophets, the killing of his Son, the refusal of people to hear the good news, and still, God extends his abundant life to all of us.

And as we heard, in Matthew, the parable doesn't end with the wedding hall full of a motley gathering of guests. In Matthew, the story continues with yet another disturbing event. A man who has been invited and who has come is discovered by the host, the king, to

be inadequately attired. This man has no wedding robe. The King has him cast out into the outer darkness. Out of the community. And then Matthew ends with the words “Many are called, but few are chosen.” Which could be the most disturbing message of all. At least it was for those of us at Bible Study this week.

If God is all loving, how can this happen? Does God punish us?

Meditating on this passage and on this question since Wednesday, I went home to rifle through my bookshelves to find inspiration. And look what I found! *Hold up the book: “Many are called, most leave the phone off the hook.”* I found a way in and through this challenging passage.

If we refuse to answer the invitation, we miss out. If we go to the feast unprepared, resistant to the host and his hospitality, we miss out. We situate ourselves outside the life of the community, in the darkness where our loneliness consumes us.

We’ve been invited to dance, but we’ve dug in the heels of our big clunky shoes and we offer up every kind of excuse for not joining in. We miss out on abundant life, we miss out on connection, we refuse love.

But the good news is that this isn’t the only wedding. There will be plenty more. There will be community events that celebrate the coming together of people who love each other, who make commitments, who celebrate. And in those celebrations, God, as source of all life *will be* recognized.

So when a person is ready, he or she will realize the invitation has always been extended. The suffering of exclusion has been self-

inflicted. The time to stop making excuses has come. So that the party can finally begin.

Are we willing to engage with the life God has given us? Or do we refuse it, more concerned with going about our own business?

God will choose us, but only when we chose God. We have free will. Because only free will allows for love. And at that moment when we turn away from our self-centred ways to turn towards God, we know from the story of the Prodigal Son that God has been waiting for the moment of our turning, to run to greet us and gather us up in his arms and to celebrate our return. Our return, our acceptance of God's invitation to life, requires us to be ready to party. God wants to celebrate. Can we accept the invitation to dance? To step out onto the floor of life, not knowing where the One who guides us will take us? But confident that the One who leads, is all compassion, all abundance, all love. It's to this One that we're invited into relationship with. And it's up to us to say.... "Yes!"

I'll give Marcus Aurelius the last word – "When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive - to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love."

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!