**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

**101 Pondfield Road West, Bronxville, NY 10708**

***Say Yes***

**October 15, 2017 A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE NOW TESTAMENT WITNESS**

My sermon title for today is “Say Yes,” and so I was looking for a reading that includes the word “yes” for our Now Testament Witness. After searching books of poetry and the internet without much luck, the first stanza of the poem “i thank You God” by e. e. cummings came to mind.

 *I thank You God for most this amazing*

 *day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees*

 *and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything*

 *which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

**THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS** Matthew 22:1-14

In these verses Jesus tells yet another of his puzzling parables. Today it’s the Parable of the Wedding Banquet.

**SERMON**

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet has much in common with last Sunday’s Parable of the Wicked Tenants. In both parables, innocent slaves are killed, slaves who are only delivering a message from their owner. Besides the slaves, other people in both parables also undergo great physical suffering. One bright spot in today’s parable is that the king’s son is not killed, so that’s an improvement, even though we know the king’s son will be killed soon enough.

Both parables deal with injustice. Last week tenant farmers will not give the grapes they have grown to the owner of the land that they had worked.

This week invited guests say they are too busy to attend an elaborate wedding banquet, brushing off the king and his son for ordinary things. To insure that the wedding banquet does not go to waste, the king tells his slaves to go and invite anyone and everyone from the streets around the palace to the banquet.

Later in a fit of pique, when viewing the multitude of guests at the banquet, the king binds and throws one of his guests into the outer darkness for not “Saying yes to the dress,” for not wearing the requisite banquet wedding robe. How fair is that?

To begin to understand this parable it is helpful to know who the various characters in the parable are. Like last Sunday, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. To introduce today's parable Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

The king represents God. The King’s son is Jesus. But Jesus never gets married you might say (although in some traditions the Church is the Bride of Christ). But note that this wedding banquet is not for the son and his bride. This wedding banquet is for the son. It is a stag, men-only affair, perhaps like a bachelor party, celebrating the virility of the groom and the union that is to be.

When the initially invited guests give last-minute, cop-out excuses why they cannot attend the banquet, they are disrespecting the king, his son, and all the effort and expense that has gone into the lavish affair..

The wedding banquet is more than food and drink and guests. The wedding banquet is the kingdom of God, and many prominent guests were invited. These original guests invited to the banquet are the scribes, Pharisees and all other upholders of the religious Law, who believe that through their own efforts they are attaining righteousness or relationship with God.

But the originally invited guests spurn the all-inclusive message of Jesus that “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

These no-show guests kill the slaves who are bringing the news that the long-awaited banquet, the kingdom of God, is at last ready. The murdered slaves represent John the Baptist, who is imprisoned and beheaded, the prophets who are killed, and eventually God’s son, who is crucified.

When the banquet is spurned by those originally invited, the followers of the Law, the king invites everyone outside the walls to come to the banquet, to enter the kingdom and receive the largesse of the king, in other words, to receive God’s righteousness or relationship.

When a similar parable, the Parable of the Great Dinner, is told in the Gospel of Luke 14:15-24, the host of the dinner, whose guests cancel out at the last minute on him, says to his slave, “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” (Luke 14:21)

And then, when there is still more room at the dinner, the owner says to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.” (Luke 14:23)

There is one major difference between the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in the Gospel of Matthew and the Parable of the Great Dinner in the Gospel of Luke. Luke does not include the story of a man being expelled from the banquet for not being properly dressed.

Luke’s telling of the parable ends with the owner declaring, “For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner,” (Luke 14:24) rather than, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

Yet the inclusion of the story of the man without a wedding robe being expelled from the banquet must have been meaningful to Jesus for Jesus includes it, according to the Gospel of Matthew.

In order to understand what this bit of drama within the Wedding Banquet parable means, we need to know a social custom of Jesus’ day that has a parallel in our own time.

In certain Manhattan restaurants like the old Four Seasons and the relatively new Per Se, gentlemen are required to wear jackets in the dining room. While the Four Seasons relaxed its policy on jackets for gentlemen before it closed, Per Se enforces the jacket policy without exception. Men will not be seated without a jacket. No exceptions.

But there is a solution for the jacketless diner: in the back of the cloakroom is a selection of forty navy and black designer blazers in all sizes for dining patrons to borrow and wear during their meal – at no extra charge.

At wedding banquets in Jesus’ time there was something similar. At the entrance to the dining hall, there was a selection of wedding robes for guests to wear if they were not already wearing one. By making a selection at the door, everyone could dress appropriately, even last-minute guests.

The man without a wedding robe appears to have made a choice to flaunt expectation and wear what he chooses to the banquet. The king views this action as disrespectful to himself and to his son. The king says to the man, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”

I think the choice of the word “Friend” to address the robe-less man shows that the king is willing to entertain a valid excuse from the man, such as all of the wedding robes were gone when he arrived. But the man in question has no response. He is speechless. He has no excuse. So the king has the robe-less man thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen." By “Saying No to the dress (code),” the man is saying ‘No” to the kingdom of God.

And the point for us in the parable is that when we are invited off the street to God’s banquet, when we are invited as we are into the kingdom of God, a response is called for and expected. We are expected to transform ourselves in some way: For us, it's not putting on a long white robe, but it is repenting, believing in the Gospel and becoming faithful to the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When God invites us to His banquet, we are expected to “Say Yes,” to “Say Yes” to new life in the kingdom of God’s love.

Our faith matters, our faith matters to ourselves and to God. Our faith is reflected in the way we live, the choices we make. When we enter the wedding banquet we must be dressed for the occasion. Or we better have a good excuse. Amen.