

GREAT EXPECTATIONS!



EXODUS 32:1-14
PSALM 106:1-6, 19-23
PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9
MATTHEW 22:1-14

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 23; Year A
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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

I think I heard my favorite joke this past weekend at the Florida Conference, UCC annual meeting, told by Molly Baskette, our keynote speaker. It seems that, after a few weeks observation, a little girl asked her grandfather, “What does it mean when the preacher takes off his watch before he starts speaking?” The grandfather quickly replied, “Absolutely nothing!” I thought of ya’ll when she told that!

There is just something not right about this text, something that seems very unfair, even unjust in many ways. Surely, there is something missing, something we don’t get, because there is something about the parable of the king’s wedding feast that rubs us the wrong way, goes against our grain! It seems counter intuitive to what we know to be gospel truth! It is anything but politically correct. From a surface reading it certainly does not appear to be even remotely theologically correct, at least according to our minimal estimations or expectations. And, today is all about expectations! Perhaps that is why a lot of preachers usually choose to skip this text. It is a mine field! To try and sort out, to make sense or to justify the story in any way whatsoever causes the homiletical choreographer (that would be me) to do a serious tap-dance, side-step, or shuffle. To be honest, the *Hokey-Pokey* seems to be the appropriate metaphor describing the standard hermeneutical

approach used by most commentators when they interpret this parable. You remember that fun song, “You put your right foot in, you take your right foot out . . .” And, so on

SouthShore United Church of Christ is striving daily to ever become the kind of “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable beloved faith community that best reflects, perfectly models the ministry and mission of Jesus. These are not mere buzz words, cute and catchy phrases, but they represent our deepest desire, our hope and prayer, that they capture our imagination and our reality, even as they mirror the gospel to which Jesus bids us come and follow and that we so desperately seek to live. This is how we strive to order our individual and our corporate lives each and every day. Every day these words are tried and tested as we continue to learn how to expand our tent and broaden our circle, not to mention our sphere of influence. I am reminded of a pastor friend of mine who was once asked about the size of his church, typical conversation among clergy. His answer was priceless, “Do you mean in numbers or influence?” We have staked our claim on these words because we believe them to be rooted in Jesus and his gospel of love and grace and his amazing invitation to join him and his band in a dance with the Divine! And, then we read today’s Witness from the Gospel in the Book of Matthew, this parable of the king’s wedding feast, and once again are forced to confront exclusion in what has the

appearance of the violent removal of an invitee who failed to meet dress code, who failed to meet expectations, even if on short notice. It is disturbing because in this textual instance exclusion is affirmed and applauded, accepted as the appropriate righteously indignant response! Just what gives here?

During one of our Town Hall meetings this past Spring, I made what I consider to be both an accurate and a very sobering statement, something to the effect that while the SouthShore United Church of Christ welcomes all persons, it is not a church for everyone. Frankly, all churches practice this idea, though in all honesty most congregations are not cognizant that they practice any form of spoken or unspoken admission policies. Most churches claim to be welcoming and proudly proclaim that invitation on their marquees and other advertising. Com' on! You and I both know that premise can be easily challenged! This somewhat unsettling phrase is one that I have used in other congregational contexts as Senior Minister in helping churches understand the need for clarity about their identity as the locally gathered people of God called to be and seeking to be beloved faith community. At the time, I was speaking about theological differences, worship preferences, and even to a lesser degree, social mores. This text has forced me once again to visit this issue and ponder its implications for the Church, for local churches, and especially and particularly for our church. I offer all these comments having just returned from the 2017 edition of the Florida Conference United Church

of Christ annual meeting. Several of our folks attended and I wish it were so for all of you because these gatherings allow you to get a very real taste, an up close and personal bird's eye view of the depth and breadth of this amazing and wonderful lovefest that characterizes our denominational home. Despite a broad range of subjects, much of the theme of the meeting could be condensed into every church's need to define and proudly and boldly articulate self, especially that which differentiates from the rest of the ecclesial herd. As churches, we are so tempted and swayed by a pack mentality. We call that monster peer pressure!

I must acknowledge that this sermon is crafted out of a heavy institutional bias as we embark on our annual journey through stewardship awareness. There is always a prevalent need to engage stewardship, especially since that season is quickly approaching, an annual emphasis within most congregations this time of year as we binge and purge in analyzing deficits and impending budgetary concerns. Yet, I am not suggesting that I have simply contextualized this parable to meet this specific need, to fill an assumed void, but it is playing in the background like bad elevator music. My goal is to always deal with a text with integrity, seeking to avoid being guilty of proof texting a scripture because that is never acceptable, allowable in any form. I sincerely believe that this text indeed offers us a profound window into stewardship. Perhaps this is why the guiding hands of the lectionary editors have placed it during October, traditionally the month for emphasizing stewardship awareness

in congregations. This parable clearly presents “a picture of God’s realm that is inclusive of everyone,” but it also comes with a warning, giving us the clear reminder that not everyone is suited for certain situations. Let’s see if we can discover exactly what that means.

The first thing we should do, have to do with this parable, as with all biblical texts, is understand the context. To use an image subtly nuanced within the parable itself, we have to undress the text if you will allow that imagery this morning? Yes, that is something we do with regularity anyway. We do it all the time, but you will see from this lesson that the need here is particularly acute. When we read this parable, it is painfully obvious that Matthew has a blatant agenda. He has a personal axe to grind. Of course, that is nothing new, for all the Gospels have an agenda, the authors frequently taking liberties with their textual musings by intentionally placing words in Jesus’ mouth that he probably never uttered or, at the least, never spoke in the way they are remembered and recorded. Crediting Jesus with a quote brought instant credibility, to any idea or debate, any situation or circumstance, “street cred” we call it. There are verses in this parable that surely were added, things such as verse seven that describes the violent response of the king to those who dared decline his invitation, committing an egregious insult, the ultimate disrespect. It is also important to note that the difficult part of the text, the part we are examining today in verses

11-14, originally constituted a distinct parable in their own right. Matthew has combined them to stress his particular concerns. What are they? Well, for starters the writer of Matthew is angry with the Jews who have not chosen to become followers of the way, that is, followers of Jesus. Remember, this Gospel was written right about the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE. And, not only that, but he and his colleagues are even more peeved that all of Jesus' followers had been kicked out of the synagogues, families forever divided, everyone now left to their own devices. That boulder in the eye of this writer is Matthew's primary modus operandi for manipulating this parable, inserting it into the broader Jesus story. The climatic verse that concludes the parable, "for many are called, but few are chosen" is Matthew's ultimate condemnation of his own people, a real slam. And yes, sermons have been built around this blanket judgment which has only managed to add fuel to the fire of antisemitism, an insidious evil that has plagued the Christian faith for centuries. Sadly, we now have made the Islamic faith our religious whipping boy to pick-on and judge! But, I digress; I often do! Other sermons on this text have been written about God's judgment, providing the basis for the reality of hell for those who reject Jesus, and, naively used as a proof text requiring parishioners to dress-up to come to church. I am so glad I am wearing a T-shirt today! How absurd! How pedestrian!

But, of course there is something else, there is always something else in any biblical text, something that I believe not even Matthew was fully cognizant of, clearly aware as he altered or dared create these words attributed to Jesus. This is a text about requirements, about expectations, a parable about commitment, a reminder that there are obligations to those of us who seek God, who dare to choose to follow Jesus, that none of us is granted the luxury of just “showing up”, freeloaders benefitting from the banquet feast of the realm of God that is ironically, so freely offered. The reality is that there are no free rides in what we always pretend, because of unlimited and perhaps even unmerited grace, is a divine welfare system described as the Great Banquet Feast revealing that the realm of God has truly been ushered into the human drama, coming so incredibly near, so up close and personal that we can feel it, taste it, sense it with every sense of our being. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said so eloquently before dying for his faith in a Nazi German death camp, “grace is free, but it is not cheap.” Indeed, it calls forth something from every believer and that is the call to take up one’s cross. That is the “great expectation.” Therein is our clothing, our sacred garments, the dress for this day and every day. The parable of the king’s wedding feast is a parable about accountability and responsibility within the beloved faith community, two very loaded terms. Oh, how we tend to forget that these texts were intended to be read by the community within the community. Unfortunately, all too frequently we individualize,

privatize them as if they were personal devotional readings. We err when we forget their original overarching purpose.

Oh, we certainly are quick to take issue with this storyline and its very demanding king. As was his prerogative, as kings, as royalty is wont to do, he had invited all the beautiful people, the “A” list, VIPs. Surprisingly, no shockingly, and most ironically, and all at the same time, all of them declined the invitation finding other pursuits to amuse themselves, occupying their precious time. But, by God, come hell or high water, there was going to be a wedding and a wedding feast to boot and there had better be a room full of folk to celebrate, or there really would be hell to pay. And so, after destroying the ingrates who turned down his gracious invitation, rejecting his “extravagant welcome”, in a fit of vengeful rage, the king instructs his slaves to go out into the common places of life, the highways and byways, and invite the normally down and outs, the disregarded and ignored, those deemed disempowered by society, the disenfranchised and marginalized, all of those who would have never normally qualified, assumed to be permanently black-listed, the “uninvitable” in every way imaginable! Yes, the king invites everybody. Yes, it is very short notice, but when the king requests, no demands your presence, you get yourself in high gear and get yourself to the party. It was the opportunity of a life-time for those who never get to travel in the rarified air of these kinds of circles.

This was far beyond a rare, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! No one in their right mind would turn down this invitation, and on the day of his son's wedding, indeed the banquet hall is packed. Again, despite being short notice, evidently somehow everyone had managed to cobble together the appropriate attire, decked out, dripping with all the finest accoutrement required for a grand wedding feast. For many, no doubt, it came at great sacrifice. I'll bet that "two-mited" widow we read about elsewhere was there, perhaps even having to beg, borrow, or steal the money needed to outfit herself. But, there they all were, looking just like the beautiful people. They dressed up well!

Except for one! There is always one! One man stood out like a sore thumb. Poor "schlep"! For whatever reason, he failed to get the memo and failed to get a wedding robe. Couldn't afford one, couldn't find one . . . did not matter! The king, the father, spots this sluggard across the room. The mighty king is filled with anger and rage. The very idea, the audacity of coming to my house underdone, underdressed! How insulting to the king, but even more so to his son. I am reminded of those new Bud Light commercials featuring a king from an apparent Medieval Banquet. You may have seen it. Those who bring Bud Light to the party are applauded as a true friend of the realm. "Diddly diddly!" The one who smugly brought a spiced honey mead wine was cast into the "pit of misery!" "Diddly diddly!"

The king instructs his attendants to bind up this vagabond and cast him out into the dark of night. Our immediate thought is “my, just a tad overkill, don’t you think; just a touch of over reactivity there?” Yet, for the king, this is an egregious trespass. The marriage of his son is the high point of royal protocol. The nerve of this lazy slacker coming unprepared for this event. How dare he!

What is challenging in this text for the contemporary church, and I must say particularly of its leaders, is the ability to name the necessity for nurturing responsibility, commitment, yes, stewardship in local congregations. There is a real fear in asking of congregants, that is you, dedicated volunteers who give boldly of time, talent, and treasure, to do even more. We have all heard the complaint by those who have been turned off by the Church claiming that all churches do is ask for money and more commitment than is humanly possible. It makes us clergy a little timid! Yet, the reality and the bottom line is, we cannot “be” and “do” church together without the selfless herculean efforts of the membership. It is no different here at SouthShore United Church of Christ than it is in any other congregation anywhere. For those who were at the Florida Conference meeting we heard the refrain loud and clear. Stewardship is the clothes we wear when we choose to serve Christ as a part of a beloved community of faith. To be non-stewards is to be naked, or at least ill-clad as a church member. As one preacher has noted in a sermon on this parable, titled “Don’t You Have a Clean Shirt?”

“Invitations to faith and to the life of a local congregation come graciously and freely; but that does not give us license to approach the banquet hall of the church casually and with no preparation. At the very least we can put on clean shirts. Clean shirts come in a variety of colors and styles. We remove them from our closets when we take time during the week to prepare with prayer and study for worship on Sunday morning. We don them when we carefully reflect on our financial stewardship instead of merely tossing into the offering plate whatever we can spare when it comes our way. We wear them proudly when we accept new offices” Stewardship really is the total of the clothes we wear when we decide to join with a faith community.

My guess is that none of us really disagrees in principle with any of this. Even so, we still struggle with a text like this because it seems unnecessarily harsh and even unjust, full of the kind of judgment that we all deplore and despise. There is a danger that these kinds of texts will guilt us rather than grace us, causing us to react out of shame or embarrassment. So, we hide our gifts and fail to respond at all. Perhaps unfortunately, sometimes we need the kind of stark reminder unveiled before us today to get our attention. Perhaps it is painfully necessary to jolt our complacent tendencies! Sometimes a sobering reality check is the only way to get a positive response out of us. I mentioned earlier in this sermon that it is apparent that Matthew had an agenda, that he clearly

had an axe to grind. Well, before he edited this parable, it was Jesus who, likely, told at least a version of it. And, even without the added venom, the parable still packs quite a punch. You see, if we literalize the chronology of the text, Jesus was in the final week of his life and no doubt the stress of his impending doom was weighing heavily upon him. No wonder there was a rough edge in his words.

As for the father in this story, the king, perhaps his angry response, his wrath toward this one without a wedding gown, maybe his reaction comes from a sense, a feeling in his gut, the sneaking suspicion that he, his son, his family, and his position were being taken advantage of. There is a respect factor. The danger that all of us face in our faith journey is that we become complacent, that we take God or one another or this precious gospel for granted. As Rick Brown, in a sermon called, “A Black-Tie Affair” notes:

“Maybe the story is right to remind us that in the presence of the Holy God, fear is the beginning of all wisdom. Maybe we have become so buddy-buddy with God and with the story of grace that we have forgotten that there is a sternness, there is a demand in grace, that there is rigidness of justice that cannot be ignored. We so focus on the God as my buddy that we have forgotten that it is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of a living God. It is a frightening thing to be told that we are the creatures who have been given stewardship of the earth by God.” Closer to home, that we have been given the stewardship of this sacred space.”

Brown's comment strangely called to my mind the great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards in his most famous sermon delivered during the Second Great Awakening, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God." We have all taken turns bashing puritan theology, puritan values. And, let's face it, a lot of it really was way over the top in its puritanical Calvinistic rigidity. But, could it have been that Edwards, like his contemporaries, believed to some degree that God was being devalued, taken for granted. Therefore, what we are seeing is a window into their own frustration and despondency, their experience with a vast hopelessness. God has become such big business, such a huge show in our American culture that there is nothing left for the imagination. No mystery, no awe, no wonder, not even the ancient idea of fear or holy terror. In many ways, God has become anything but God.

So, what about us? None of us wants to be taken for granted. Again, perhaps that was the King's primary issue. We are all filled to capacity, maxed out when it comes to the operation of this place called SouthShore United Church of Christ. It can be very easy to take each other for granted in all that we do. For those who give sacrificially, those who serve sacrificially, there can be emptiness, hollowness. Sometimes I am sure that some think it might be easier to be someplace else. Far less demands! Yet, for many, if not most of us, this is where we have chosen to invest ourselves in the faith enterprise. These are the people with whom we have chosen to cast

our lot and build community, beloved faith community, being as trusting and as vulnerable as we can be in the process. We need each other. We need to love and encourage, support one another, offering words of thanks and affirmation for jobs well done. After all, we indeed have much for which to be thankful in this wonderful earthen vessel, and nothing or no one to take for granted.

Our keynote speaker for the annual meeting of the Florida Conference, United Church of Christ was the Reverend Molly Baskette, pastor of the First Church, UCC, in Berkeley, California. Her core purpose was to remind congregations, that no matter their circumstances or situations, that resurrection can always seize the day and that renewal is always in vogue, an ever-present necessity. But, her key point that stuck with me most was her reminder that healthy, happy churches always find their traction, their strength in allowing for vulnerability, to be transparent. Yes, to allow oneself to be naked before God and before one another. This is a metaphor! As she says, to be “who you are!” It is counter intuitive because many believe that these are the supposed weaknesses that we need to hide rather than emphasize. She reminded us of a Walter Brueggeman quote, “Church should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest!” Tell that to one of our neighbors! We are at our best when we tell our honest stories, revealing our true, authentic selves, not hiding behind our running rackets that only serve to prop up our

grandest mythologies. In other words, we need to keep it real, as real as we can stand. Even so, Baskette reminded us that our honesty must never do harm, irreparable harm to anyone. “Do no harm” must always be our perpetual and abiding guide. Yes, there is always real tension in that. She mentioned the polarities that are our constant companions, always vying for our limited attention, “fear/courage, darkness/light, cutoff/reunion, grief/acceptance, anger, forgiveness, and, (drumroll needed), money/God!” We search for equilibrium, for balance, in the midst of our disequilibrium, seeking to close the gap between our realities and our fantasies. Finally, she declared that the goal of our churches is to create safe spaces where “participatory transcendence” can take place. I love that phrase! In other words, we are all accountable to one another, yes, even responsible to each other to help everyone experience the Divine, the Holy in our midst. It is a tall task, a sacred duty, a holy obligation, herculean as it might be. But, it is the joy of our beloved faith community. When anyone is estranged here, all of us suffer. We are incomplete because it takes all of us to be the SouthShore community. After all, church is all about covenantal community, undergirding the importance, the primacy of every individual created in the image of God.

Ministry in any church setting is always a labor of love. Nothing comes easily! And, not only that, part of being beloved faith

community is that, to at least some degree, everyone is intimately privy to everything. Sometimes, this can be overwhelming to a degree, TMI as we are prone to say (too much information, too much intimacy). Church work from within the inner circle, from a leadership perspective, is often messy! Some have likened it to making sausage. Many folks love to eat sausage, but would never want to see it made! Being and doing church demands vulnerability. It is just too intense for a lot of folk. I understand this reality. I have been doing this kind of work for quite some time now. I pray that we all be sensitive to the danger of burnout in our midst, for that potential, that possibility always exists within us all. We cannot, we must not ever take any of our precious human resources for granted.

My guess is that few if any came to this place today undressed and exposed as our friend in the parable, and so I ask for grace in sharing these words of warning that it brings. Today is simply a reminder that this church needs you and your gifts like never before. Do not take yourself or others for granted for it takes all of us to build this ecclesial village. Be faithful and of good cheer. Do what you are able and what brings you joy and peace and hope. And, if it does not do that for you, give it up quickly. Abort! Abort! Know that you are loved and appreciated by this beloved faith community, by your pastor, but most of all by your God. And, always remember, that even when we fail to acknowledge it, you are appreciated in every precious way,

**for every beautiful gift you bring to this beloved faith community.
May we all be well-dressed in the days to come. In the meantime, we
are called to “be” and “do” church together.**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and calls us
to be well dressed in our most naked vulnerability. Amen and amen!**

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