

“YOU’RE INVITED ...RSVP.”

21 Pentecost – Year A – Proper 23

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, October 13, 2002

Have you noticed how invitations have become big business? Anyone who has a wedding coming up, or graduation, knows that they are choices to be made. Will they be engraved or embossed? Will vellum paper be used? Don’t forget to put stamps on the reply envelopes. The paper selections, type faces and more are just a few of the decisions to be made. Birthday invitations, special dinners and other special events in our lives are taking on the glamour of the invitation craze. They are all meant to capture our attention and compel us to come.

Of course, many of those invitations come with the letters, RSVP. These are French words that mean “please respond.” Have you noticed how fewer and fewer people do respond? Just ask nervous brides and their mothers! How many are coming for the reception? We haven’t heard back from a lot of people! I’ve heard all kinds of reasons for not answering: “Or, they know I’m coming already.” “I’m just too busy.” “I don’t care to go.” My favorite response has been: “I’m waiting to see if I get invited to something better.” More than just bad manners go into our lack of responding. It’s disrespectful. Why can’t we be bothered?

One reason, I think, is that we are bombarded from all around by other “invitations.” We call them advertisements. You can pick up a magazine, watch a television show or drive down the highway without be assaulted with a cry to have this product. We are told we just can’t live without it or that it will make our life worth living! Are you like me when the mail comes? I stand by the trash can and toss nearly two-thirds of my mail, advertisements, into the circular file. I am still getting Jennifer’s mail. Do you know what college kids get the most invitations to? They get invited to become consumers, credit card owners! The message from our culture is that you just can’t live without this card. Something is terribly wrong here.

If we look carefully at the Gospel of Matthew, we see an invitation being given. Once again, Jesus’ parable gives us insight into how God works. The evangelist, Matthew, also gives us a glimpse of what the early Church was faced with through his editorializing of the passage. We must remember that in Jesus’ time, meals were important and intimate gatherings. Relationships were reinforced at these events. Nourishment came on several levels ... spiritual, physical and emotional. It is into this world that Jesus’ parable brings some shocking news.

As Jesus tells the story, an invitation goes out to those expected. The practice in Jesus’ day was to send an initial invitation, advising of the coming event. A second invitation would go out when the feast was fully cooked. You had to be prepared to come when the invitation arrived. What happens in the parable is those who should have accepted did not. They rejected the invitation. They made excuses. Some were too busy, some did not want to leave what they were doing. It wasn’t important to these people. They had better things to do. This would have shocked Jesus’ listeners. After all, who wants to miss a free party? Jesus’ message is even more shocking. After the rejection, those invited are dealt with severely. Furthermore, if the invitation is rejected, others will be found to invite.

Jesus is talking about a relationship with god. If we refuse it, it will be offered to others. Matthew is wrestling with the fact that Christians are being expelled from the synagogues. The editing makes the feast a wedding (look at the Luke version and notice the difference). For him, it is Jesus’ own people who reject him, and he sees the Good News of Jesus Christ being offered

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to the Gentiles now. God will not be stopped by our refusals. The Divine will keep seeking until receptive hearts are found. Those first invited will be replaced by those not thought to be worthy or qualified to attend.

What about today? Some people say we are turning away from God. A Gallup poll says that 90% of Americans say they believe in God while less than 45% attend worship services regularly. Are we destined to go the way of Europe? Church attendance has fallen off so badly there that many of the Churches are now mausoleums or museums. Some religious watchers in this country believe we are traveling down the same path. Maybe we should just save time and put a sign out front right now, “Grace Church Museum.” We are turning away from God. On the other hand, the Church is witnessing tremendous growth in South America, Africa and other parts of the world. God will seek out souls that will receive the Holy. The message is that someone else will take our place.

Look what happens on the second round of invitations. They go out to the “crowd.” God will not wait forever for us to respond. The invitation in their case is accepted! This would have been unthinkable to some of Jesus’ audience. To others, the outcast, it would have been great news! Those who accept come with excitement, anticipation, desire, hope and connection. Jesus says God will embrace those who are willing to be fed. For Matthew, those were the Gentiles who would become the Church. All it takes is receiving and responding. Even today, God will find those who will take a risk and respond in faith to the invitation. The same applies today. God will not wait forever for us to make up our minds. There will be multiple invitations, but some day they we be offered to others.

What the parable, and Jesus, are talking about is the Kingdom of heaven. It is a new heaven and a new earth. It can’t be made over into what we want. God decides what the kingdom is like. It comes in the unexpected, the unlikely, the untimely. The invitation comes when we are busy, preoccupied, and flush with thoughts that we are independent and self-sufficient. The kingdom can’t be bought, or earned or attained because of some social status we think makes us more important than others. Jesus is talking about being engaged and connected with God. It happens in a new way. It comes as an invitation and we are asked to “please respond.”

Are we looking for God today? Or have we decided we have already found the Divine? Are we prepared to answer the invitation? Maybe you are like me, and don’t know what it looks like. Tell me, has anyone here received an invitation from God in the mail? If you have, save it and show it to me. I’d like to know what it looks like. No? No one has one in the mail? What will the invitation look like? When will it come? How will we know it? If you are confused and uncertain, take heart, most of us feel the same way.

What is needed now is a new way to look at ourselves and a new way to be the Church. Last February, I attended the Gallup Conference in Washington, D.C. They have spent the last few years trying to look at the American Church. They have noted the downward trend, especially evident in the Protestant Churches. Why was this happening? Is there another way to move to stop and reverse the trend? One of my first learnings, is that as Churches, we focus too much on outcomes. Do you know what three things we tend to worry about first? They are money,

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volunteers and member numbers. It became clear to the Gallup people that growing, healthy Churches focus on something else. They are concerned with spiritual health first.

The Gallup Conference proposed asking the questions differently. The focus is not on which service we like, how the liturgy is done or who is doing what. Gallup discovered that 26% of most parishes have people that are actively engaged in the life of the Church. Another 56% are only partially engaged. The remaining members are actively disengaged. What makes those 26% so involved? These people have a spiritual health marked by engagement, connection and purpose. Gallup challenged me to start asking different questions. First, what do you like to do? Second, what do you do well? Third, what are you going to do for God and the Church?

So often we are so preoccupied with filling the slots that we already have that we miss the gifts and talents already in front of us. We want a vestry position, Sunday school teacher, property committee member. We labor and moan over the fact that people are not volunteering like they use in the past. It feels like a small number of people do most of the work. A new approach is needed. First, we have to stop thinking it is about what God will do for us. We have to drop this consumer mentality. God has already do for us through creation and redemption. God created us, this day, our family and friends, the world of which we are part. God has redeemed us in Jesus. We are saved, forgiven, loved and more. Now it’s time for us to focus on accepting the invitation. It’s time to live into the fullness of our creation and redemption.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we have lived too much into the “protestant” model of the Church. Don’t get me wrong, I think a lot of good came out of the Reformation. However, we have distilled it down into this idea that Church is just about “me and God.” Our focus is too narrow and too little. It’s not enough. It’s time to live more into the “catholic” model of our faith. By this I do not necessarily mean the full model of the Roman Catholic Church. I am talking about the sense that the church is a community, it’s about “we and God.” It’s time to focus on those around us as well as ourselves in our relationship with God.

The time has come for us to create more opportunities to talk. We need more than the usual coffee time chit chat about family, work and the latest gossip. We need more than social gatherings. We need to talk about our faith. How are others going to know how to be a Christian unless we share? How will others know what is important and meaningful to the person of faith? It’s time to talk with each other about how God is part of our lives. It is not enough to come for an hour on Sunday and think that’s it. It is time to live our faith daily.

The time has come for us to prepare. God comes in the least, the unexpected and the unlikely. We must treat each day as an opportunity to encounter God. We must treat each person as if they were the bearer of the invitation. We have to ask those three questions of ourselves and others. The invitations are coming. So tell me, how will we RSVP?