

“What If Nobody Shows?”

Matthew 22:1-10

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A first grade teacher gave her 6-year-old students an assignment. The next day they were to bring in a symbol of their religion. The next morning she called on Isaac, who stood up and said, "I am Jewish and this Star of David is the symbol of my religion." The teacher then called upon Mary, who stood up saying, "I am Catholic and this Rosary is a symbol of my religion." Next came Bobby. "I am United Methodist," he said, and he held up a casserole dish.

I'll bet most of you have heard that one before, but how appropriate for today, right?

As you read the sermon title and hear the Gospel lesson this morning, you might think that I planned them around our World's Biggest Potluck Buffet event tonight. But that's not how it worked! I promise you that I chose the sermon title over a month ago, before I even knew we were going to have a world record-breaking potluck buffet. I will admit though that the connections are pretty interesting.

We're going for a world record tonight. In order to make that happen, we need a lot of help. It takes a lot of people to make over six hundred dishes. And even if we don't break the record, we're going to have a ton of food, so we're going to need a lot of people to help eat it all. What a feast it will be!

As the planning for the event has been going along, there have been many questions along the way. One question we haven't even wanted to consider was what we would do in case of rain. Thanks be to God, we don't have to consider that. We've got a beautiful day today.

If you're like me, you've also been wondering if we're going to even come close to the record. Especially after hearing last week that we had less than one hundred dishes registered and we need over six hundred. I have to say that every time that issue has come up, the organizers of the event have responded with a great deal of confidence that we'll at least be close to the record even if we don't break it. Their confidence has given me confidence, and I think we'll pull it off!

But one question I haven't heard is this: "What if nobody shows?" What if we plan this big party and nobody shows up? That would be a big problem. We most definitely wouldn't reach our goal of breaking the world record, and we wouldn't reach our goal of building community.

In this morning's text, Jesus tells a parable about another event for a large group. In the parable, it's a wedding feast that a king is holding for his son. Now the process of inviting guests was a little different back then than it is today. When a big party was to be held, the host sent out messengers to let the invited guests know to expect a party. The

date and time of the party wasn't part of that first message though. The message was simply, "Be ready." When everything was prepared for the party, the host would send out messengers again saying that it's time to come.

So in the parable, when the king sent his servants to tell the guests it's time to come to the wedding feast, the invited guests refused the invitation. Some simply disregarded it. Some were too busy with their work in the fields or in their businesses. Some actually mistreated and even killed the messengers.

The king was outraged, and said, "Those folks weren't worthy to come to my party." He instructs the servants to go back out and invite anyone they found, which they did, and the banquet hall was filled with people, both good and bad.

Most scholars agree that original people who heard this part of Matthew's gospel would have understood its basic meaning. You see, scholars believe Matthew wrote his gospel to a Jewish audience, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. So those who heard this parable would have recognized it as an allegory to the work of God in relationship to the Israelites. The Israelites were those who had originally been invited to the feast. They were God's chosen people. But when the time came to act upon their invitation, when Jesus came, they refused the invitation. They disregarded the message. They even mistreated the messengers, killing some of them. So the king, God, opens the invitation to all the world, the Gentiles as well as the Jews, the sinners as well as the righteous.

So that was the original context and meaning of the story, but for us who hear the parable today, there are still a couple of important points to consider. First, the invitation God gives us is like the invitation to a wedding feast. It is an invitation to be a part of a joyous occasion, part of a celebration of love. It is a free gift, and if we ignore the invitation, we truly miss out on something special.

The second point we need to consider is that God's party isn't just for a special list of invited guests. God opens the party up to anyone who will come. You don't have to have a pre-existing relationship with God to be invited. You don't necessarily even have to know who God is or be on good terms with God. The relationship will come later. All are welcome. All are invited to the party. God wants everyone to take part in the feast.

So it seems like a question we should ask ourselves is, "Am I in danger of being like those in the parable who didn't show up?" When God extends an invitation to us, do we accept that invitation? Do we simply ignore it? Do we turn instead to other things like our work, our hobbies or our other activities?

We're in the second week of our annual "My Hands Are Christ's Hands" stewardship campaign. Each year we focus on the commitments we have made to be a part of the church through our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service. Today's focus is on our vow to support the church through our presence.

I think it's interesting and important to note that presence is a separate vow that we take when we join the church, and I think there are at least two implications of this separation. The first implication is that our presence alone is an important part of our commitment to the church. It's important to simply be present, and a part of the life of the church in that way, because each one of us has something to offer just by being who we are. In some ways, it's the answer to "What if nobody shows?" Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20).

Think about what it's like when you're watching a movie. When there are lots of people watching with you, the laughs tend to be louder, it's a more enjoyable experience, and maybe the scary scenes are more tolerable because it's safer with others around you. In the same way, the things of faith are made better when shared with other people. The joys are made more joyful because we can share them with others. Our pain is more bearable when we share with one another. Our faith is deepened when we hear other people's thoughts and opinions and struggles. Jesus is made known in new and powerful ways when we are together. Yes, our simply being present is important to the life of the church.

The second implication about presence being a separate vow is that it reminds us that our presence is something different than our service. Have you ever really thought about that? Maybe you have and it's just a revelation to me because of my mindset as a pastor and leader in the church. You see, there are so many things that happen in the life of the church, and so many jobs to do to make everything happen. But working to help those things happen falls under the vow we take regarding our service. By vowing to be present, it means we don't always have to be part of the team that makes those things happen. It's ok to simply show up. The simple fact that we are there to support the things that others are doing is important. Our vow to be present tells folks that we will be there for them to give life to the events and ministries in which they feel called to serve. Our vow to be present prevents the church from having to ask, "What if nobody shows?"

So how are we doing with our vow to be present? Are we taking advantage of the variety of opportunities for fellowship and faith formation given to us by our church? Are we living up to the vow we've made to be present?

Of course, to some degree, I'm preaching to the choir, because we're all here today. We're all present. But let me ask you this: Why are you here today?

For some of us, we're here to find some solace or some grounding amidst the whirlwind of life. For others, we're here to get a lesson or a thought for the week. For some, it's because church is just what we do on Sunday mornings. Others are here because we want to connect with other people that are important to us. If we're honest, are any of us here today simply because we once made a commitment to be present? I doubt it. But what if we did? What if we lived our vow to support the church with our presence to the fullest? Is worship the only thing we're supposed to be present at?

As I said before, there are an incredible number of opportunities at Maple Grove to deepen our faith and to deepen our fellowship with one another. One of the things that breaks my heart is when I see someone who is passionate about a ministry or a cause, and they put a lot of effort into something, time spent planning and preparing, and very few people show up. It causes them to question their call, it frustrates them, and it often lowers their interest in working on something else. It can suck the energy and excitement for ministry right out of them. What effect would our commitment to be present have on the future of ministry with those folks?

But it's not just about supporting the people who feel called to lead a specific ministry. We can get a lot out of living our commitment to be present. I can't tell you how many times I've considered not attending an event or a study at the church because I've got so many other ways I could use that time. But what I can tell you is that the overwhelming majority of the times when I do show up, I leave the event or the study really happy that I was there. When I open myself up to opportunities for faith formation or faith-related fellowship, God consistently blesses that time I've devoted, and my relationship with God and with others is enhanced.

You and I have a great banquet prepared for us. God invites us to come and celebrate with him. The door is open, the invitation issued. For some, it's an invitation to a relationship with God for the very first time or the opportunity to open ourselves up to experience God in a new and powerful way. For others, it's an invitation to deepen our commitment to God and to the church through the gift of our presence. No matter what the invitation is for our specific circumstance, a feast of love and companionship and peace and security is ours. God wants us to have it. How will we answer? Will we show up?