

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY  
AFTER PENTECOST  
OCTOBER 15, 2023**



**ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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**\*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

**(Adapted from Psalm 106)**

ONE: Let's thank the Lord, for the Lord is good.

**MANY: God's love endures forever.**

ONE: Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord or fully declare God's praise?

**MANY: Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right. Our God is worthy of our Praise!**

ONE: Remember us, O Lord, when you show favor to your people that we may enjoy your blessings.

**All: Let us worship our good God, who blesses us with infinite love and abundant grace. Amen!**

**\*PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

Lord Jesus, we gather to worship you today with hearts full of joy and appreciation for the beauty of your diversity and extravagant welcome. We invite your Holy Spirit to this space to celebrate your goodness and presence in our gathering time together. Prepare our hearts to receive what you have for us today. Amen!

**\*INVITATION TO CONFESSION:**

God is not fooled by our pious words of faith. God knows our fascination with golden calves – with pastimes and possessions that take our attention and resources every day. Like our ancestors before us, we have sinned and deserve God's wrath. As Moses implored God to spare the Hebrew people, we bring our petitions, seeking a fresh start.

**"WORDS OF CONFESSION:**

ONE: We ask your forgiveness, O Lord, for not being truthful in acknowledging that we have failed you and those you entrusted in our care.

**MANY: We know that we have a long way to go, O Lord, we ask that you open our hearts to be receptive to your Holy Spirit.**

ONE: We ask you to transform our hearts within so that we will be renewed in our commitment to be the beloved community you are calling us to be.

**Moment of Silence....**

*(Each person is invited to take this time to surrender to God privately anything weighing heavy on their heart.)*

**ALL: Hear our prayers for forgiveness, O Lord, that we may know your mercy and compassion. Amen!**

**\*WORDS OF GRACE:**

God demonstrated his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)  
Beloved in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

**\*GLORIA:**

**Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here. One God always here.**

**SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Exodus 32:1-14**

**Worshipping the golden calf**

**32** The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods<sup>[a]</sup> who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

<sup>2</sup> Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

<sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" <sup>6</sup> They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything!" <sup>8</sup> They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

<sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

<sup>11</sup> But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, "LORD, why does your fury burn against your own people,

whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

**EPISTLE LESSON: Philippians 4:1-9**  
**Stand firm in the Lord**

**4** Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Loved ones, <sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life. <sup>4</sup> Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your

prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. <sup>7</sup> Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. <sup>9</sup> Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

**\*GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 22:1-14**  
**Parable of the wedding party**

**22** Jesus responded by speaking again in parables: <sup>2</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn't want to come. <sup>4</sup> Again he sent other servants and said to them, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Look, the meal is all prepared. I've butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything's ready. Come to the wedding party!"' <sup>5</sup> But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. <sup>6</sup> The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding party is prepared, but those who were invited weren't worthy. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of

town and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.'

<sup>10</sup> "Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests. <sup>11</sup> Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn't wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup> He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' But he was speechless. <sup>13</sup> Then the king said to his servants, 'Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.' <sup>14</sup> "Many people are invited, but few people are chosen."

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

**Thanks be to God, Amen.**

**MESSAGE: "Who is in and who is out?"**

(With thoughts from Rev. N. T. Wright)

So, what's with the wedding garments? I promise, by the end of this lesson, we'll have an answer.

First of all, we must remember that parables are made-up stories; the events in the story did not actually happen. So, we shouldn't get upset when the poor man without a wedding garment is thrown out of the party. It doesn't mean it really happened. What it **does mean** is important to us and to the original listeners. The ordinary people from the villages are standing around Jesus and are waiting for Jesus to help them. They are hoping for a life-line or

something for them to hold on to in their miserable lives of poverty, hunger, illness, and oppression. They want Jesus to save them, and isn't that what we all want, even now? Salvation.

Sometimes we get bothered because the story doesn't say what we want it to. We want to hear a nice story about God throwing the party open to everyone. We want to be inclusive to let everyone in. We don't want to know about judgment on the wicked, or about demanding standards of holiness, or about weeping and gnashing of teeth. Doesn't the Bible say that God will wipe away every tear from every eye?

Well, yes it does, but you have to see that in its proper setting in the book of Revelation to understand it. It doesn't mean that God will act like a soothing parent settling a child back to sleep after a nightmare. God wants us to be grown up, not babies, and part of being grown up is that we learn that actions have consequences, that moral choices matter, and that real human life isn't like a game of checkers where even if we do badly the pieces get put back in the box at the end of the day and we can start again tomorrow. The great, deep mystery of God's forgiveness isn't the same as saying that whatever we do isn't really important because it'll all work out somehow. This is not a lesson we want to learn. Often people dislike this parable because it teaches it.

Of course, when Jesus told the parable it had a particular point and focus. This parable follows straight on from the devastating story of the wicked tenant farmers in last Sunday's parable; who answers the call of Jesus and who rejects it. Every one of the listeners to Jesus' parables in those days would know the point. This story is about the coming of God's **kingdom** and in particular the arrival of the **Messiah**.

Israel's leaders in Jesus' day, and the many people who followed them, were like guests invited to a wedding – God's wedding party, the party he was throwing for his son. But they had refused. Galilee had refused, for the most part. Now Jerusalem was refusing the invitation as well. God was panning the great party for which they had waited so long. The Messiah was here, and they didn't want to know. They abused and killed the prophets who had tried to tell them about it, and the result was that their city would be destroyed. (Twice in the Old Testament and again in 70 A.D. Jerusalem will fall.)

But now for the good news – though it wasn't good news for the people who were originally invited. God was sending new messengers, to the wrong parts of town, to tell everyone and anyone to come to the party. And they came in droves; the people we met last Sunday, the tax-collectors, the prostitutes, the riff-raff, the nobodies, the blind and lame, the people who thought they had been forgotten. They were thrilled that God's message was for them after all.

**But there was a difference between this wide-open invitation and the message so many want to hear today.** We want to hear that everyone is all right exactly as they are; that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. Stop a minute and think about that. When the blind and lame came to Jesus, he didn't say, "You're all right as you are". He healed them. He changed them. When the prostitutes and extortioners came to Jesus, he didn't say, "You're all right as you are."

His love reached them *where* they were, but his love refused to let them stay *as* they were. Love wants the best for the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed, changed.

Actually, I don't think that God wants *everyone* to stay *exactly* as they are. God loves serial killers and child-molesters; God loves ruthless and arrogant businessmen; God loves manipulative mothers who damage their children's emotions for life. **But the point of God's love is that God wants them to change.** God hates what they're doing and the effect it has on everyone else – and on themselves, too. Ultimately, if God is a good God, God cannot allow that sort of behavior, and that sort of person, if they don't change, to remain forever in the party God is throwing for his son.

That is the point of the end of the story which is otherwise very puzzling. If the servants herded all the "other" people into the party, how did they have time

to change their clothes? Excluding this one man is sort of like social exclusion that the gospel rejects.

Yes, but that's not how parables work. The point of the story is that Jesus is telling the truth, the truth that political and religious leaders often like to hide: the truth that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. **They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding.** (repeat)

And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying you don't want to stay at the party. That is the reality. If we don't have the courage to say so, we are deceiving ourselves, and everyone who listens to us.

**Love, justice, truth, mercy, holiness. Those are the clothes you need to wear every day to remain at God's party forever.** Amen.

#### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

Gracious God, we thank you for all that you provide and the blessings we receive daily from you. We know that, at times, we feel hopeless amid so much uncertainty in our world, but we trust you, O God, to bring us peace. And to give us comfort when we are overwhelmed with anxiety. Please help us be calm in the chaos around us and give us the strength to overcome.

Compassionate God, we lift prayers for the homeless, the hungry, the lonely, the rejected, those left behind, and all suffering injustice in our community and the

world. We pray for all those on our prayer list and those we hold in our hearts. Hear their cries for healing, wholeness, and acceptance, O loving God.

Loving God, we pray that our hearts will be open to the change that needs to happen here on earth so your Sovereignty will be a reality and all your creation will sing your praises. Please help us to see each other as gifts from you. Let us enthusiastically embrace your love to share the good news with those who need to hear and receive your amazing grace. Amen

#### **THE LORD'S PRAYER:**

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

#### **PRAYER RESPONSE: NCH 774**

**Shepherd, lead, lead me in your righteousness,  
Make your way plain before my face.  
For it is you, God, you, God only,  
Who makes me to lie down in safety.**

#### **INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:**

All we have comes from you, O Lord. So, we give our offerings and tithes with generous hearts in thanksgiving for all you do for us. May these gifts

given today offer hope in proclaiming and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ our Savior with all the world.

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION:**

**Take our offerings and tithes, O God, bless them that they may be used to share your love and blessing in our community and the world. May these offerings provide for the least of these needs and the proclamation of your word to those seeking hope. Amen!**

**\*CLOSING HYMN: "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus"**

**'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,  
just to take him at his word,  
just to rest upon his promise,  
just to know, "Thus saith the Lord."**

**(Refrain) Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him!  
How I've proved him o'er and o'er!  
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
O for grace to trust him more!**

**Yes, 'tis sweet to trust in Jesus,  
just from sin and self to cease,  
just from Jesus simply taking  
life and rest, and joy and peace.  
(Sing Refrain above)**

**I'm so glad I learned to trust you,  
precious Jesus, Savior, Friend,**

**And I know that you are with me,  
will be with me to the end.**

**(Sing Refrain above)**

**\*BENEDICTION:**

**May the Love of the Creator sustain you!  
May the peace of Jesus flow through you!  
May the presence of the Holy Spirit fill you with grace!  
And give you the courage to share the good news!**