

Blessed or entitled?  
Psalm 23      Matthew 22:1-14

Good morning and welcome to our Harvest Fest service. Today we begin to bracket the time of year when we celebrate all that God has done for us. Starting with the Harvest Fest today in the traditions of the Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland, and ending with our American Thanksgiving luncheon, for the next few weeks we will be reflecting on what God has done and continues to do for us...and what we have done in return.

To begin, however, we need to admit that we are not really people of the harvest. That is, our lives do not revolve around the successful gathering of produce from the fields. Although we may have some connections to farming, it's not really a part of any of our lives.

Years ago, when I served a church in Iowa in the US, we lived in the midst of the farm belt. People, individuals and families from our church and our community lived for the harvest. A good harvest meant new clothes, a new(er) car or truck, college tuition...the good things in life. A bad harvest meant a hard winter, dropping out of school, making do for one more year and, if it followed another bad harvest, perhaps even losing the family farm. The farmers we knew were not corporate farms...these were private individuals often struggling to get by. Celebrating a good harvest was really the most important time of the year for these families.

But harvest for us, what's that mean? The price of pears at the grocer's is impacted as much by politics as by harvest, so we may have to pay a bit more (or a bit less). Perhaps our favorite fruit is not available, so we'll have to make do with one of another dozen choices. It might mean the price of coffee is up a bit, or sugar down. In our world, with so many options being available to us year-round, in such abundance, we really don't think of the harvest all that much, do we? I mean, who really pays attention? If the wheat harvest in Kansas is down...maybe a few families will lose everything, but there will be imports from somewhere else and we'll still have our bread and our baguettes, even if we complain about having to pay a few cents more.

And so, we come to Harvest Fest, and we sing the autumn hymns, and we have our Harvest Fest auction and we thank God for all we receive...but really, what does it mean to us? Don't we often take it all for granted?

Today's scriptures carry a powerful theme to remind us of just exactly what God is doing in our lives. In order to make sense of all this, I am going to select just a couple of verses from our readings.

First, it would be entirely possible to preach an entire sermon series on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. If you have ever memorized scripture, I suspect this is one you know from heart: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." Of course, most of us know as little about sheep and shepherds as we do about harvests, but we certainly get the message...God provides, we will not find ourselves without what we need. I suspect the word "want" is misleading here...We can "want" a huge TV or a new car or new clothes or an extravagant holiday but that's not what the scripture addresses. "I shall not want" is more about God providing what we need.

This reading is paired with the parable of the wedding feast from Matthew's Gospel. You know the story you've just heard: The King prepares for a wedding for his son and invites all the important people to the wedding feast. But they refuse. Some say they are too busy, others have prior commitments, still others ignore the invitation completely, yet others still attack, even kill, those who have come in the name of the King.

The King gets angry, has his soldiers kill the murderers and most likely put out those who were too busy. He then sends his servants to the highways and byways, to the common people, the powerless ones and invites them to the table. Good and bad. Lovely and unlovable, they were all invited. And they came. By ones and twos and by the dozens they came, responding to the King's invitation.

Of course, there was one fellow...there's always one, isn't there? This one fellow felt it was fine to accept this invitation from the king, but felt no obligation to respect it even in the least. He couldn't even be bothered with putting on his nicer go-to-church clothes. Maybe he figured the King owed him something? I don't know, but you know how the story ends...with this fellow being thrown out into the dark. And then we come to the verse: "For many are invited, but few are chosen".

The Psalmist tells us that "God provides" ...and then Jesus reminds us that we have a responsibility as well. God provides...and God invites...but we are free to ignore, or disregard, or diminish all that God has done.

The King invited many to the feast; and this was a “big deal”! This was to be a “everything goes, no stops” party. The King was going to provide for the most lavish feast ever. But there were many who were too busy, too self-absorbed, and too full of themselves. They ignored the King, dismissed his offer...even attacked his servants.

Now let's take a quick tangent: Matthew's audience would have easily recognized the symbolism here...The King (God) invites the privileged (the religious elite) to a feast in honor of His Son (Jesus). But those invited were too arrogant to be bothered with the invitation. They ignored or even beat and occasionally killed those who had come to spread the word. They would have understood these images quite well.

So back to the story: So the King invited others; less proud, less arrogant, not on the social register I can guarantee you! (We know who those folks were, and so did Matthew's audience...he was talking about THEM!)

But even then, even among these, the King had a basic expectation...come appropriate. You have been invited by the KING after all. NOT because the King owes you anything, but because the King is gracious. Get this part right: you are NOT entitled to anything here. The King doesn't owe you. Quite the contrary, and despite this, you are invited. The least you can do is respond in an appropriate manner!

It's that way in our lives as well, isn't it? God invites. You have been invited, I have been invited. It doesn't matter your station in life, who you know, how much your retirement plan is worth, what power you have or don't have. You are invited. BUT YOU MUST RESPOND!

That's the rub in all this, isn't it? Oh, we're hopeful, when we think about it, but eventually cynicism and frustration begins to curl the edges of our hope. Is this invitation really for me? What does it cost? What does it mean? Can I just have the party without all the “stuff” that goes with it? I'll get back to you on this, OK?

The message is a hard one: It is a message about sin – those things that separate us from our neighbors and make us feel separated from God. It's about the actions and intentions, both real and in our thoughts. It's about the things we have done and the things we have left undone. The invitation is there for us...but we must respond.

But it is also a story of salvation, of release. This is not just about forgiveness, but a powerful, truthful, toe-curling honesty of our lives released: Released from the fear of death; Released from the captivity of sin; Released from the mistakes of the past; Released INTO the freedom of a new future in God.

But we have to put on the love of Christ...it's the clothing for the banquet. That's the story of amazing grace. That's the invitation that the King has made to each one of us.

God has provided, God has invited. That is the simple message of today...God provides, God invites.

But

But that is not the end of the story. Like the guests to the wedding feast, we have a choice to make. We can ignore the invitation completely. That's easy to do, isn't it? We're busy after all! I mean, we have good intentions and we'll get to it, someday. I'm sure the King heard that one more than once.

Or we can reject the invitation. Who are these people calling themselves "Christian" who want me to follow some God? They're nothing but a bunch of hypocrites! Look at the way they act, look at the actions they take and justify it by their faith! I have better things to do than hang out with people like that! Easy, isn't it? I have said on more than one occasion that I love my faith, but I get distressingly tired of what people do in the name of that faith!

Or, we may just decide to accept the invitation. And now what? Now we must respond. IF we come to the feast the least we can do is be appropriately dressed: wrapped in the garments of Christ's love. We come, not because we are special, just forgiven. We come, strong and weak, rich and poor, tall, short, skinny, not-so-skinny...we come. And we are welcomed. By the King and His Son!

The Psalmist tells us God provides. Matthew records Jesus telling us we are invited. So, what does that have to do with the harvest? Everything.

You see, salvation is not by works, but grace. BUT the signs of that grace are the work we do in response. We don't earn or buy salvation; it's free. But once we own it, once we claim it as ours, then we MUST show that grace in our lives by the actions of our lives.

To expand on that metaphor, the seeds of faith have been planted in you, nurtured by the Spirit. The logical question is, “where’s the harvest”? How are YOU showing that action in response to grace in your life? How are YOU living your faith in response to God’s grace in your life?

There are nearly an infinite number of ways to respond, reflecting that grace, bringing forth a harvest to reflect god’s bounty: giving, sharing, teaching, leading, supporting, nurturing. What are you doing? How have you wrapped yourself in the garments of Christ’s love?

God provides. The King invites. The feast is prepared and there is a place waiting for you. Are YOU ready?

If you can’t think of anything; anything you do, any way you contribute, any way you support or any involvement you have to give in response to what God has given you, perhaps it’s time to make sure you are dressed for the banquet.