

Worship Service Resources “ *Upside Down* “

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A,

15th October, 2023

Philippians 4:1-9 NLT / Matthew 22:1-14 NSRV

Prelude

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Opening Music (video)

[All Things](#) written and performed by Kirk Franklin,
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Welcome / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn

God is Here Among Us - 16

Call to Worship

One: Children of God: welcome!

All: Welcome to this place of love and grace,

One: Welcome to this place of hope and perseverance.

All: God invites all of us to be a part of the beloved community,

One: God invites all of us to share in the good news:

All: We are welcome, just as we are. We are loved, just as we are.

One: In gratitude for all of this, let us worship God.

Invocation

Gracious God, in love You open wide the doors and welcome us into Your presence—saints and sinners alike. You spread a table before us, filled with the richest fare—a feast of love and mercy for the body and soul.

We come with joy to meet You here, to eat and drink at Your table, to taste and see Your goodness, to celebrate Your grace and mercy in our lives.

May Your Spirit inspire our praise and thanksgiving, our prayers and petitions as we worship together in Your presence. In the name of Jesus Christ, our host and Lord, **Amen.**

Epistle Reading: Philippians 4:1-9 NLT

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.

Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement.

And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!

Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

A Time of Prayer

Sharing Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Dear Lord our God, we are thankful that you are constantly at work in our lives. You are... a help in times of difficulty, a strength in times of weakness, a guide when we feel lost and alone.

We know that through Your Son, Jesus Christ, You have the power... to transform lives to mend broken relationships to bring strength to the weary and hope to the broken hearted. So we bring our worries and our burdens, our hopes and dreams, before your throne of grace. knowing that you are the Lord of our lives and the hope of the world.

Today we pray for world leaders that they may always seek the peace and security of our world: We pray for countries laid waste by war and conflict and dictatorship, remembering especially, the plight of people in Ukraine and those in the Holy Land. We pray for countries shaken to their foundation by earthquakes, fire, and floods Remembering especially Afghanistan, Mexico, Maui, and Libya.

We pray for first responders, police and emergency services, as they seek the peace and security of our nation; and for ordinary people caught up in the events of world politics.

We pray for the world-wide Church, recognizing our fellowship with Christians in Africa, Asia, South America and throughout every corner of the world.

We ask your blessing upon pastors and crisis counselors, medical workers and food bank volunteers whose task it is to feed the hungry, heal the sick and support the broken hearted.

Lord, we pray for your church here in Seattle, for those that are thriving and those that have lost a sense of direction. We give thanks for our own church and its people, and gladly acknowledge all the gifts you have given us.

Grant us your help and guidance and support. We too, have problems and needs and concerns— worries about ourselves, our families and those we love.

We remember in our prayers today... those who are worried about their health and what the future might hold, those who feel anxious or depressed or afraid those who are in the hospital those with burdens they find impossible to share those who still mourn the loss of someone dear to their heart.

And we pray for ourselves— that we might know the gentle hands of Jesus in all parts of our lives— leading us, guiding us, encouraging and directing us, now and always. **Amen.**

Hymn *Take My Life* 389

Gospel reading Matthew 22:1-14 NRSV

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet."

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,

and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Message - *Upside Down*

There's a story of the pastor giving a children's sermon, where every week the children anticipate him making a new point about Jesus. This particular week he begins by holding up a stuffed squirrel and asking, "Boys and girls, do you know what this is?" Silence. The pastor asks again. Silence. Finally, one little boy is bold enough to shyly raise his hand and offer, "Gee, I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure looks like a squirrel to me."

How much do we do the same thing, try to make every parable we hear be about God or Jesus as the main character? Too often when we do this, we then need to somehow make the moral of that story fit the character traits of God, even when the actions portrayed seem so far from the loving God we come to worship. What would happen if we look to find God in the lesser characters? If we cease to automatically assume the king or rich landowner is God or Jesus? Today's scripture is a prime example of this.

Traditional interpretation over the years makes this parable about God as the rich king, coming down hard on the wedding guests for not showing up, murdering them, in fact. Then when new guests are selected, one who has not brought out his best clothes, or has chosen not to wear the wedding tunic provided, is banished and left to die by the “gnashing of teeth” of the wild beasts. Does this sound like the kind and just God we usually think of?

Theologians over the years have tried their best to make this parable fit with God as the king. Preachers talk about the first wedding guests being the Pharisees and temple authorities of Jesus day who fail to heed the call of Jesus and are destroyed. Another way of approaching it is to focus on the one without the wedding clothes as someone who refuses to accept Christ, and is cast out. But what if we consider the possibility of God in this parable being the very one who refuses to give in, to wear the garment provided for him. What if God, incarnated in Jesus, is the one cast out to suffer the “gnashing of teeth?” How does that change our perspective on this parable? Well, for starters, we would need to reevaluate the conception we often have of God as the triumphant king and ruler, in favor of the view that Isaiah 53 provides. In that scripture, we hear of the “suffering servant”, one who was “despised and rejected by mankind...oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.” Sounds a lot like the Jesus we hear in Matthew's gospel, doesn't it?

Theologian Marty Aiken remarks that instead of seeing the king as making Jesus' audience think of God, he argues that this king would have sparked in Jesus' audience thoughts of kings much closer to their situation in history, namely, the Herods, especially the first King Herod. Drawing from historical sources such as Josephus, Aiken shows how the Herods actually behaved in ways very similar to the king in this parable. With a monarch so brutally dictatorial, does Jesus really mean for us to think of divine kin-ship with this parable instead of the kind of petty dictators such as the Herods who so litter human history with victims? We are presented with a brutal, tyrannical king doling out terroristic punishment on his subject, particularly on the one who quietly resists, without saying a word in his own defense.

Jesus himself responds with silence in Matthew more than in any of the other gospels. For example, Matthew 26:62-63: “The high priest stood up and said, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ But Jesus was silent.” And Matthew 27:11-14: “Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus said, ‘You say so.’ But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, Do you not hear how

many accusations they make against you?’ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.”

What has happened to that man in the parable is what is about to happen to Jesus. Jesus ends up looking much more like the guy at the end of the story than the king at the outset. Yes, we started by hearing the king as God, but by the end of the story, as disciples of the crucified Christ, we are generally more sympathetic to the guy thrown out of the party.

What do you think? Is this a case like with the Children’s Sermon of expecting to see Jesus but instead seeing a squirrel? Is it a case, in other words, of expecting to see God when we hear “king” but Jesus instead giving us something very different? I think that it is, and I’ve become increasingly convinced that this is the only way to take seriously all the terrible details about how this king behaves. Sometimes a king is simply a king.

In fact, in the human world of authority, this is the king we expect to find because all human reigns are based on the authority of violence. Even at “peaceful times,” the “peace” is maintained through the threat of an army or police force. We can see the king in this parable as the tyrant he is, a king who rules with the worst kind of brutality and terrorism, often under the guise of “law and order.”

But what about the introduction Jesus gives us at the beginning of the parable, introducing this story as an example of the kin-dom of heaven? Is that image to be compared to the suffering servant exemplified in the man without wedding clothes? If that's the case, then we need to look on the king and his kin-dom as the example of the way in which our earthly, violence-based authority is on display. If that's the case, it would follow that the kin-dom of heaven looks more like the man who stands silently before him at the end of the parable. In short, it looks like what happened to Jesus when he stood silently in the face of his accusers and let them throw him out into the darkness of death.

But in examining this concept of the kin-dom of heaven referenced by Jesus in this parable, I think it's important to reflect on another scripture from this gospel, especially when trying to understand the so-called parables of judgment, like the one in this morning’s Gospel. In Matthew 11, verse 12, Jesus says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kin-dom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” Jesus makes it clear how to identify the kin-dom of heaven. Human, earthly kin-doms operate by the threat or use of force; they dish out the violence. But Jesus is telling us straight out that the kin-dom of heaven is about suffering the violence instead of dishing it out. It believes steadfastly, in other words, in the power

of love and forgiveness as the greatest powers on earth. So, if we keep this clue in mind from the first part of the Gospel, it helps us understand these strange parables at the end of Gospel, which Jesus tells in Jerusalem just as he himself is about to suffer their violence in love and forgiveness.

This morning's gospel lesson about the violent king and the man not dressed in a wedding garment is about the collision of a typical earthly kingdom and the kingdom of heaven. So does this mean we are bound to the same fate as the guest without wedding clothes, or worse yet, the same fate as Jesus? Probably not. But we can expect suffering and trials for standing up to this empire and this world's violent ways.

The Book of Acts shows us the apostles spending quite a bit of time in prison for standing up for God's way of love and forgiveness and healing. Paul, in our reading from Philipians today, was written in prison as well. He tells us in our reading today to rejoice in the Lord, but to also be in the same mind as well. And where do we see the kingdom of heaven today? We see it in those who step out of their comfort zone and take the risk of standing against the evil, violent ways of the kingdoms and empires of our day, those who choose to not go with the flow of the ways of society that are unjust, or promote violence as a solution and means of control. Those who choose not to go along with what culture says is the norm, when those practices cause the hurt and oppression of others.

But even though we may put ourselves at risk, we have the promise of a different kind of banquet, with one who has suffered and died, and succeeded in overcoming the violence of the world through the love and peace of the resurrection. I pray that we all choose to be the ones who risk being the suffering servant, the one who chooses not to wear the garments of this world, but always seek the love and peace of the kingdom that draws near, and join together in the real banquet that matters, with the most excellent of hosts. May it be so, Amen.

Call to Serve

Gracious God, receive the gift of our lives and this offering of our service to carry your love from this place to a world in need. This we pray in the name of Christ, whom with you and the Holy Spirit, reign in our hearts and lives, one God now and forever. Amen.

A Time for Reflection

Prayer of Thanksgiving

No special qualifications needed; No particular connections or exclusive memberships required; No secret passwords or unique attributes expected; No campaigning or canvassing, no examinations or reference checks;

Just an amazing invitation to a feast; to find our place at Your table, alongside these other unworthy ones, these other beloved ones; these others humble enough to accept the invitation without asking who else will be there.

Well, Jesus, Lord of the Feast, with thankful and open hearts, we accept Your amazing invitation.

Hymn ***For the Healing of the Nations*** **367**

Benediction

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our lord.

Postlude