Thanks and Giving
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
October 11, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 21:33-46 and Matthew 22:1-14

Happy Thanksgiving!

We are very lucky today. We usually take our readings from the lectionary. And the lectionary is the product of a global, ecumenical group. So of course, Canadian Thanksgiving is not really on their radar. And yet, today, we get a parable about a feast. In Matthew's version of this story, it's called a "wedding banquet". In Luke it is simply called a "great dinner". But in any case, it seems to be the party of the year. On the surface, it's the perfect reading for Thanksgiving Sunday.

But of course, Jesus has to bring his politics into it. It is not a story about people eating too much pumpkin pie. It's is not a story about drunken uncles and children stealing drumsticks. This party story is about extending the table of hospitality to social outcasts. It is about turning a formal dinner party into a mass feeding of homeless people. It is about seeing ourselves in what society calls the least of the least.

We will get back to that. But first, I'm sorry to tell you that it's my job to inform you that the wedding banquet is actually not really like a Thanksgiving dinner. The parable is not even about a banquet. It's not even about food. How can a story about a banquet not be about a food-based celebration? I'm glad you asked!

If you are confused, it's not your fault. It's not my fault either - in case you are wondering. The problem is that there is a little glitch in both of the parables we read today. They are not actually parables at all. They are analogs. And I want to illustrate that difference by bringing in another story.

[slide: animal farm]

Who here remembers the story *Animal Farm*? Animal Farm is a story written by George Orwell about life on a farm. On this particular farm, the animals come to the conclusion that the human farmers do very little of the real work and yet they take all of the produce. It is the animals who pull the ploughs, haul things, lay eggs, get slaughtered. So the animals as a group stage a revolt, kick the human farmers out, and take control of

the farm themselves. In the early days of new management the animals all share in the work and they share in the profits. But as the story proceeds the pigs decide that they are superior to the other animals.

[slide: some animals are more equal]

The pigs decide that they should do more of the thinking and less of the physical labour. Over time the pigs come to believe that they should be privileged and get most of the produce for their own use. The pigs move into the farm house, give lots of orders, and spend their days eating and drinking. The pigs come to expect the other farm animals to do all the work, while they do no work themselves. The pigs in fact become identical to the original human farmers. In the end, the animals are no better off than when they started. The only difference is that the pigs are now running the farm, not the original human farmers.

So how are we to understand the story Animal Farm? What is it really about? I suggest that there are at least 3 ways to hear the story.

One way to hear the story is literally, in which case the story is about animals taking over a farm. We would probably classify that as fiction. But the plot is interesting, the characters are compelling. It's good drama!

Another way to hear the story is metaphorically. We can hear the story and imagine ourselves as characters in the story, and we can examine our own feelings. Heard that way, the story is not about animals at all. The meaning we get from the story depends on who we identify with. If we identify with the human farmer, then the story is about betrayal and dealing with people who don't appreciate the work that we do. If we identify with the pigs, the story is about the loneliness that comes with leadership. Or perhaps the story is about how easy it is to become that which we most hate ourselves. If we identify with the other animals, perhaps the story is about how hard it is to improve our social status.

Another way to hear the story is the way that the author intended. Because Animal Farm was actually written as an analog to the Russian Revolution of 1917-1918. The farm represents Russia.

[slide: farmer]

The human farmer represents the last Tsar of Russia.

[slide: napoleon]

Napoleon - one of the most obnoxious pigs - represents Stalin.

[slide: snowball]

Snowball - one of the idealistic pigs - represents Trotsky.

[slide: boxer]

Boxer - the workhorse - represents the working class.

[slide: sheep]

The sheep represent the masses. I won't give you the complete character list. But most of the characters can be mapped to individuals or groups that were important to the Russian Revolution. And that was done intentionally by Orwell.

So what is the story about? Is it a fictional story about animals? Is it an invitation to explore our own feelings? Is it an opportunity to learn some history? What is the right way to read Animal Farm? I'm going to suggest that that is the wrong question. In my mind a better question is, what's the most helpful way to read the story? Which way of reading Animal Farm brings you healing and hope?

[slide: wedding banquet guest thrown out]

Which brings us to the parables from Matthew that we read today. How are we to read those two stories? Which way of reading these parables helps you find healing and hope?

If we read these parables literally ... well, we don't really get a lot of detail. The images presented are not particularly uplifting. What do we do with the idea that a street person was invited to a banquet, and then was thrown out for not being properly dressed? That doesn't make much sense. In a literal reading, that person is long dead and gone anyway. If there was more detail we might enjoy these stories literally. But basically, they are not very interesting. You could not make a decent musical based on these stories, that's for sure.

What if we read these stories as analogs. That's what the original author intended. And if they are analog, who is being represented? To understand that we need to remember that at the time, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was important to Jewish

people. Matthew's gospel was written not long after the Romans destroyed the temple in the year 70 AD. In classic Jewish theology, bad things happen when the people are not faithful to God. The author of Matthew may well have thought that the destruction of the temple was because of such unfaithfulness. In the words of Shelley Douglass, "The classic answer for the Hebrew people was that destruction was the fruit of disobedience. Therefore, Matthew says, contemporary Jewish people were punished - and for what? [According to Matthew] For not accepting Jesus."[1] Also at that time, the followers of Jesus were evolving from a Jewish sect to a new group that included non-Jewish members. Over time that group was turning into the early Christian community. These two developments are embedded in our two parables.

[slide: vineyard in Palestine]

In the first parable, The landowner rents a vineyard to some people. But after they reject the landowner's messengers, and son, the landowner kicks the original people out of the vineyard and installs new tenants. Here's the analog. The landowner is God. The vineyard is the kingdom of God. The original tenants are the Jewish community. The messengers who the tenants reject are the prophets. The son who is rejected is Jesus. And the new tenants are the early Christian community.

[slide: banquet]

In the second parable, a king invites his favoured guests to a banquet. But they refuse to come so the king ignores them and invites a completely different group to the banquet. Here's the analog. The king is God. The banquet is the kingdom of God. The people originally invited is the Jewish community. The people who actually come to the celebration is the early Christian community. And the homeless person who was bound and thrown out for not being dressed properly was the pharisees.

Both parables are actually different takes on the exact same message. They both tell the same story. And that is that the early Christian community had taken over from the Jewish community. At least in Matthew's mind.

[slide: matthew was wrong]

And I want to be very clear on this. Matthew was wrong. Some churches do

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[1] www.sojo.net member materials.

preach that Christians replaced Jews in God's eye - an idea that is called "replacement theology", or "supercessionism" but that is completely wrong. But I thought I should explain that to help us make sense of these parables. Because without that understanding, these parables make no sense at all.

Reading these parables as analogs, it at least makes sense why the stories were created the way that they were. These analogs give a sense of the struggles the early Christian community faced when they moved beyond being simply a Jewish sect. Reading these stories as analogs helps us understand why these stories were created. However, it makes the stories hard to relate to ourselves. Today, we do not see ourselves as having replaced Jews. At least, I hope we don't. And Christianity is not fighting it's way through its birth pangs now. But reading these stories as analogs should at least put our minds to rest as to what they were originally intended to mean.

[slide: alarm clock]

If you've been sleeping up to now, it's to wake up. Reading the stories literally was not interesting. Reading the stories as analogs we understand them better, but cannot relate to them today. What do we find if we read the story of the wedding banquet as metaphor? Perhaps then we will get some traction. Perhaps we will find a message of healing and hope. Particularly for Thanksgiving.

[slide: thanksgiving meal]

As metaphor, the story is about opening our hearts and minds to people who are not like us. It is about opening our lives to others. Most Thanksgiving Sundays I turn this into a call to action - that we should invite others to share our Thanksgiving meal with us. This year, we are struggling to share Thanksgiving even with our families. So I am not advocating - as I usually do - that we drive home from church through downtown and invite a stranger to our table today. You can look forward to me sharing that message with you next year! But even this year, we can open our lives to people who we think are not like us. People who we think are different. Because by sharing our lives with others, we just might discover that they are not so different after all. We are all human beings and therefore reflections of the creator.

[slide: unknown person]

Here's a story of one human being. This person was born in the US, out of wedlock to a Muslim father and a mother of German and Swiss background. Because his parents were not married and this was the 1950's, he was put up for adoption. He managed to get into college but dropped out after a single semester. At that point, he lived sleeping on the floor in friends' apartments, and making food money by returning pop bottles. He ate one free meal every week at a Hare Krishna temple. When he finally secured a technical job at the computer company Atari, he saved up his money for a spiritual retreat to India. He eventually made it to the Kainchi Ashram in India for a spiritual encounter. Later, he returned to the United States as a Buddhist, with a shaved head and dressed in traditional Indian attire. He also experimented with LSD during this time. He credited his psychedelic experiences as among the most important experiences in his life.

This person was - at various times in his life - adopted, homeless, hungry, a pauper, a spiritualist, and an enthusiastic drug user. Does that sound like someone you know? Does that sound like someone you might invite to your Thanksgiving table? And yet, if we open our doors, our tables, and our hearts to such people, we never know who we might meet. In this particular case, if you had invited this person into your home you would now be bragging

[slide: steve jobs]

about how you knew Steve Jobs before he co-founded Apple Computers and became one of the most influential people in the world.

[slide: thanksgiving meal]

And so, on this day of Thanksgiving, what is our response to Jesus's continuing invitation to God's banquet table? Are we too proud - or too busy - to be with the crippled, the blind, and the lame who eat with Jesus? Are we willing to sit at-table with whoever shows up to God's banquet? Remember, that's a metaphor. It's not only about a Thanksgiving dinner. It's about our lives. It's about our present. It's about our future.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Amen.