

Willow Glen UMC November 6, 2011 Matthew 25:1-13
"O Wow"

Our Church Conference, where we make a report on last year and affirm leaders for the new year, is coming up on November 27th. It's the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. We're holding it at Los Gatos UMC with the seven other churches in our circuit. It's not a great weekend. It's not the most convenient venue. But there is one saving grace: there will be food.

You don't have to be a Methodist for very long before you learn that you can't do anything with folks unless you feed them. Apparently, Jesus learned the same thing. Have you ever noticed how so many of the important things in the Bible happen at feeding time? Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding in Cana. He turned water into wine. Then there was the dinner party for five thousand, catered by holyspirit-events.com. Of course, the Last Supper took place around a table, or should I say, along one side of it? And don't forget the post-Easter

Breakfast-By-the-Beach where Jesus and his disciples order the catch of the day.

Gathering for food is so central to this life; it's no wonder that eternal life is conceived of as a banquet. In Matthew 22, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." [22:2] And when we take communion, we are getting a foretaste of that feast. Our communion liturgy says so: "By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet."

All this food imagery is making me hungry, which is a good thing. We should all be hungry for heaven. But all the talk of banquets and feasting makes me think that the kingdom of God is really just one big party. Tony Campolo thinks so. The evangelical social activist tells a true story that functions as a modern-day parable.

One time, Tony was in Hawaii for a speaking engagement. He was jet-lagged and couldn't sleep, so he roamed the streets looking for an all-night diner. While he was eating a donut and drinking some coffee, in swaggers a group of loud ladies of the evening.

Tony listens to their rough talk and learns that one of them is going to have a birthday the next day. Another of the ladies sneers at her, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake and sing happy birthday to you?" The first woman says, "I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. Why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life."

When the women left, Tony asked the guy behind the counter, "Do they come here every night?" "Yeah," the guy named Harry answered. "The one who's going to have a birthday, does she come here every night?" "Yeah, that's

Agnes. She's here every night." "Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

Harry called his wife from the kitchen and plans were made for a cake. Tony came back the next night with decorations and a cardboard sign that said, "Happy Birthday, Agnes." The word got out on the street and people gathered, and when Agnes and her colleagues came walking through the door, everyone screamed, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes was shocked and then she began to cry. When she could talk, she told the crowd that she wanted to go a few doors down to show her mother the cake.

While they waited for her to return, Tony told the crowd, "What do you say we pray together." And he prayed for Agnes and for her life and her salvation. He prayed that God would be good to her. When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter and said, "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

You know how the Bible says that when we're put to trial for our faith, the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say? [Mark 13:11] It sure worked that day. Tony answered him, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry said, "If there were a church like that, I'd join it."

Harry, there is a church like that. The Church of Jesus Christ will throw a party anytime anywhere that one of its lost sheep is found. If you doubt me, read the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, the parable of the prodigal son. [Luke 15] Jesus is always ready to throw a party for you.

In fact, there's a party going on right now. But do you ever get the feeling that you're missing out on it? There's a party in our parable this morning. And in telling it, Jesus issues us an invitation. But the Master is also Mr. Manners and gives us some pretty stern advice on etiquette.

Here are some rules for party-going in the kin-dom of God. First rule: The party of eternity is worth the wait. The five wise bridesmaids knew that weddings are all about waiting. So they brought plenty of oil and were prepared for a long night.

Any real advance of the kin-dom takes a very long time. Protesters in New York and in Oakland and around the world are angry at the system and they want change. But they're going to have to learn that bringing about real and meaningful change is a long slog. It takes patience, perseverance and a whole lot of personal sacrifice. Look how long it took to get rid of slavery in this country? And then look how much longer it took before African Americans got the vote. How long will it be before they get true equality? My message to the Occupy movement: better bring plenty of oil for your lamps. The kin-dom of God is worth the wait.

Second rule: RSVP early. Unlike our earthly parties, we have to commit ourselves to this one. We can't put it off until

the last minute. The five foolish bridesmaids didn't fully commit until it was too late. Then they tried to buy oil for their lamps at midnight. Who sells lamp oil at midnight?

So we have to buy that season ticket and commit our social calendar to the kingdom. We have to organize our life around this party, not try to fit it in if it's convenient and if nothing better comes along. When the time comes, when the guest of honor finally arrives, we'd better be in our seats before the house lights do down, before the ushers bar the door.

Another image: We never know when babies will come, but we sure do prepare for them. While they are still in the womb, they've already taken over our lives and our bank accounts. We make all kinds of preparations for their birth. Do we make any for our rebirth? Parents: that question is for you.

A final image: On Friday, I did a funeral for a former surfer dude from Santa Cruz. And it made me think about how surfers

are always ready for the big wave. They will drop everything when the surf's up. The kin-dom of God is bigger than the biggest wave at Maverick's. Are we prepared to drop what we're doing when the kin-dom tide comes in? Jesus says, "Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Finally, Rule Number Three: Don't crash the party. Be sure you know the host before the party of eternity begins. The hardest part about this parable is when the five foolish bridesmaids arrive late and are shut out of the party and Jesus says to them, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Now, I can't imagine Jesus not knowing any of us, but I can well imagine our not knowing him. "I do not know you" sounds more like "you've never taken the time to get to know me."

How old am I? How old are you? How much time have we had to get to know Jesus? What are we waiting for? I'll tell you what breaks my heart. I've been here for four months,

watching and listening to your lives. And it pains this pastor to hear someone say, "I want to feel more connected to God, to others. I know I need it, but I don't know how to make room in my life for it right now." Or, "If you gave me the opportunity to experience that kind of intimacy, I probably wouldn't take you up on it." It pains me because I feel the same tendencies in me. Too many of us are willing to pass on the party for the sake of our children, our spouses, our jobs. But how can we be of any use to anybody if we let our own lamps go out?

I don't know about you, but I don't want my light to go out. I don't want to miss out. I've had just enough of a glimpse of the bridegroom to know that his party is going to be good. There's a song that we sing in the early service, and it talks about how we can only imagine what it will be like to meet him. We can only imagine what the kin-dom of God is like. That's why we have to talk in parables, like the psalmist who says, "I open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of

old." It's all dark to us until that day. We can only try to imagine it.

When I think about that party, I think about how everyone who should be there will be there. I think about how there will be a place at the table for everyone. No one will be homeless. No one will go hungry. Everyone will be happy. As the song goes: no more crying there, no more dying there. Just living, laughing, singing, dancing. Hearts exploding with God, spirits saturated in grace, bodies bursting with joy. If there's a single word to describe it, it would have to be "Wow."

Last Sunday I preached about how Wesley died and about how someone recorded every word he said, everything he did in his last days. That night I was reading the news and came across the story about the day Steve Jobs died. His sister, the novelist Mona Simpson, wrote this: "Before embarking, he'd looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life's partner, Laurene, and then over their

shoulders past them. Steve's final words were: OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW."

I couldn't have said it better. Whenever we meet Jesus, it's "Oh Wow." So, why wait until then? The party's about to begin. If you're looking for the "Oh Wow," why not meet him now?