

Building Faithfulness Along the Way

October 11, 2020

Exodus 32: 1-14

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

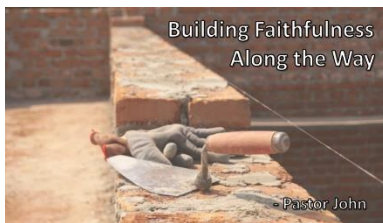
⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt'!" ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Matthew 22: 1-14

¹ Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ 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.' ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all

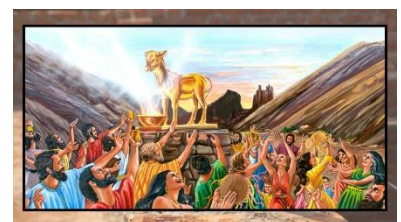
whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the 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.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."



Welcome to week two of "Thriving"! Last week we heard the calls to step out in faith and to consider our dreams and visions for how we can each be a part of the

building of the kingdom here in this place. This morning we first look at Israel's struggle to build faithfulness along the way as they turn to a false god in the wilderness. Second, we will about the call to the banquet. We will hear about those who refuse to respond, about those who do respond, and about the one who at least appeared to respond. As we prepare to turn to Exodus 32 in our Bibles as we look at how we can build faithfulness along the way in our journey of faith, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we turn to the story of the golden calf, we discover that Moses is lingering too long on the mountaintop. The people become impatient and this leads them away from trusting in God. They quickly turn to worldly connections to find comfort and assurance. The people ask Aaron for another god to worship and he quickly obliges, casting an idol for them to worship.



When the people lost sight of Moses and his vision and leadership, when they lost focus on their aim, of living in the Promised Land, they began to fail. In a similar way, when the church loses its focus on the vision and mission, when we take our focus off the aim of the harvest, off the goal of making disciples, we can settle for a level of discipleship that is less than pleasing to God. When our focus is on something other than making disciples and on growing deeper in our relationship with God, then we as churches tend to become inwardly focused, much as the religious leaders had become in Jesus' day. Instead of being focused on the call to make disciples, we too can focus on our own idols and on the things that bring us comfort and assurance.

Going on to verses seven through fourteen, we see God's reaction to the people's sin. God sees that they have acted perversely, noting that *"they have been quick to turn aside from the way I commanded them"*. After acknowledging that the chosen people have cast and sacrificed to an idol, God condemns this *"stiff-necked people"* to experiencing his wrath. Before we continue with the next part of the story, let us pause and acknowledge our own tendencies to turn away from the ways of God and to instead walk our own path. Each of us has our own things that make us wander, things that we think bring us earthly pleasure or happiness. For some it is shoes or clothes, for others it is cars or homes. For some it is the latest cell phone, for others it is more friends on social media. For some it is about being a part of that certain crowd, for others it is attaining the level of partner or of opening one's own business. I could go on and on. We all have things that we can dance around, that we can worship, that we can put in the place of our relationship with God.

The Israelites chose a golden calf this time. We read in verse ten that God's fire will consume these stubborn and sinful people! It is then that Moses intercedes. This is one more example of both his faith and his exemplary leadership skills. Moses first points out what a waste it would be to rescue the people from Egypt only to consume them now with fire in the desert. Second, he reminds God of the promises that God himself made to Abraham and Isaac and to all of Israel. Moses reminds God that he promised to make them numerous *"like the stars of heaven"* and to give them *"the land that I have promised"*. With these soothing and true words from his chosen leader, God relents and decides not to punish the people. Moses stood in the angry space between God and the people. He faithfully interceded on their behalf.

The Israelites' journey to faithfully walk with God and to keep focused on the goal, on living into God's purposes for them as a people of God, continues. Over the course of the next eight chapters of Exodus, the people will learn more and more about how to walk faithfully with God. This golden calf episode will be a painful lesson for the nation of Israel, as it often is for us when we turn to false gods as we worship idols. As we saw with the people of Nineveh and as we saw with the nation of Israel during their time in exile, today we again see that God is not a God who seeks to punish or condemn. God is a God of love who seeks to transform us and to make us ever more and more into the image of his son, Jesus Christ. Our God is a God of compassion who desires to have all people know his love and mercy. That is why God sent our intercessor. Jesus Christ stands in the space between God and us and he speaks on our behalf. The risen Lord intercedes for you and me, reminding God that he's already paid the price.

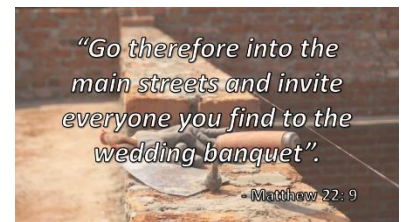
This is a role that God invites you and me to partake in as well. God invites us as Christians and as a community of faith to stand in the gap, to stand between oppression and the oppressed, between loneliness and the lonely, between the evils of this world and the righteous living that a life of faith brings. In this role, at times we too are called to be intercessors. It is part of our call to be like Jesus. Our call to make disciples of all people for the transformation of the world can butt up against people's realities or can present challenges to us.



How many have invited a friend or a neighbor or a coworker or a teammate to church? Often the result is a polite "no" but sometimes we can be rudely rejected or ridiculed or even verbal abuse. Even if just politely told "no thank you", do you ever invite that person again? You do if you love them. God loves them. Turn with me to Matthew 22 as we explore God's generous invitation to the banquet.

Today's parable begins with Jesus letting his audience know that this story compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet. Custom was to invite them to the wedding and then to let them know that all was prepared. The first call that it is time to come goes out to those who had been invited long ago. Since it is the wedding of the king's son, the guest list would be pretty exclusive, drawn from those of special standing in the community. The refusal of an invitation from the king is almost unfathomable but it happens in today's story. All of the A-list guests have excuses. They refuse to come. The King of Kings came and walked the earth, inviting one and all to come and be a part of the kingdom of God right here as it drew near. Many refused Jesus' invitation.

Many still do, as unfathomable as that may be to you and me. The excuses are many from those who refuse the invitation to know Jesus' love. Again, in today's parable we hear that those who were invited turn upon those that came to them. The pattern that was present in last week's parable is revisited. Those invited mistreat and kill those sent to call them. In this case, the king responds by destroying *"those murderers"*. Undaunted by those *"not worthy"*, by those who refused the to come when all was ready, the king sends out more invitations to the wedding banquet. This time the king gives these instructions: *"Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet"*. Jesus initially came to the Jews, God's chosen people – the A-list. But the Jews refused the invitation. The king's slaves then gathered all they found – *"both the good and bad"*. Isn't that just how Jesus operated too? All were worthy of his time. All were welcomed into his presence. All were invited to the table of grace. Jesus engaged the lepers and adulterers, the Pharisees and the secret seekers – one and all. All who had a heart that longed to be loved and known by the Savior were cleansed and made whole again. Are we as generous with our invitations? Or are we careful to only invite those who we think are already clean? Or, instead, do we fling wide the invitation for one and all to come and meet Jesus Christ, our King? Do we ever venture out to the side streets and alleys, inviting "those" kinds of people into our community of faith?



Thinking back to the passage from Exodus and the way that story unfolded, maybe I have the story here in Matthew backwards. Maybe we think ourselves the king and God is the rejected. Maybe God prefers to live on the B-side of the

world, and we remain far away in our preferred A-side lifestyle. I believe that is the pattern we saw revealed in the religious leaders during Jesus' lifetime. Yes, he spent time in the temple and synagogues, but he preferred to be out there in the real world, engaging those in need of a Savior.

Non-verbal illustration – put on the "right" clothes prior to reading and working through Matthew 22, verses 11-14...

In Matthew 22: 11-12, we read these words: *"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".*

As he mingles with his guests, the king encounters a man who did not have the proper dress. He did not fit the part. Remember, the king sent his slaves out with the instruction to *"invite everyone you find"*. This man heard the invitation, accepted it, and showed up for the banquet. The king, this earthly king, deems this unacceptable. The guest without the proper wedding attire is bound and thrown out into the darkness, where there will be *"weeping and gnashing of teeth"*. The parable closes with these words from Jesus: *"For many are called, but few are chosen"*. This particular guest was called, and, in response, he came to the table. But, like the thorny or rocky soil in the parable of the sower, he was not ready to enter a relationship with the Lord of life. He was just there for some free food, just as many came to Jesus just to experience healing.

Jesus discerned this at times. Such was the case in the parable of the rich young man. There was interest in faithful discipleship, but the idols in his life, the cares of the world, his love of money, were greater. For those that make this choice, the choice to hold tightly to the things of the world, there will be weeping.

As it was with the Exodus passage, I find there is a word of warning here for us as well in the Matthew passage. Sometimes we can be tempted to play the role of judge. For example, we can feel the Holy Spirit's nudge to share our faith with someone but in judgment we deem them not ready to hear the gospel message. We want to apply our rules for admission into faith. We want them to have the right clothes or to be doing the right things. In my past I have looked at someone and thought to myself that they were not ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. I closed myself off from the possibility that God might just want to use me to invite that person to the table of grace. This is a tendency that I need to be constantly aware of. Once in a while, oh how my pride and ego can get in the way of the building of the kingdom of God! How my concern for having a nice, neat little church inside these very walls can get in the way of me really being a part of the church in the world! Then, Lord, have mercy.

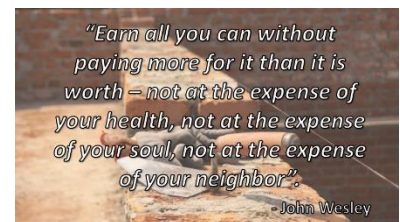


Before I close, I want to spend a few minutes considering what allowed the king to be so extravagant and generous with the invitations to the banquet.

Remember, in the end, he sent his slaves out into the street to invite everyone – both the good and the bad. The king did not discriminate. All were welcome. The banquet hall was filled with people.

Chapter two of *Earn. Save. Give.* is entitled "Earn All You Can". In this chapter, Harnish shares John Wesley's belief that followers of Jesus Christ should earn all they can because he felt that *"all disciples are called to use their gifts in ways that accomplish God's best purpose for their lives and that help fulfill God's life-giving purposes in the world"*. From this framework, Wesley calls us to see our work within the context of the larger purpose of our work as disciples in the world. This larger purpose is what we talked about last week – our aim is to make disciples for the transformation of the world. The king's wealth and his influence in the world were what allowed him to both provide a great banquet and to be able to invite those that could not possibly return the favor. This is a basic of true generosity – giving without expecting anything in return.

As a means to accomplish much for the building of the kingdom of God, Wesley calls us as disciples to *"do everything you have to today better than you did it yesterday"*. In doing so, we will find that we have more resources to contribute to worthy causes and to use in our own ways for the work of God in our community and in our neighborhoods. Yet Wesley also knew that 'earning all we can' should not be our ultimate goal - nor should it ever become our all in all. To keep our work in the proper perspective, Wesley warned, *"Earn all you can without paying more for it than it is worth – not at the expense of your health, not at the expense of your soul, not at the expense of your neighbor"*. Just as Wesley was aware, we too need to be aware that the way we earn our money will always have a direct impact on the lives of others, including our own life.



For John Wesley, the purpose of earning all we can is for doing good in the world. The money we earn is not for ourselves, nor to enrich our own lives, but our money and influence are to be used for God's purposes in the world.



In our Exodus 32 and Matthew 22 passages, we heard about being ready or not, about maybe being destroyed or not. We heard in both passages how God's love and mercy desires to go out to all of God's children. We also heard some warnings today. Both understanding the call to invite one and all to the banquet and to heed the warnings to check our own tendencies towards being judgmental and prideful are part of building our faithfulness along the way. In the end, both passages illustrate how God just wants to get the family together – the whole family. As we seek to be the church in this time and place, may we make space for all people at the table, even those not just like us either in their faith journey or in their station in life. Part of our building faithfulness along the way is building our capacity to love one and all.

As we live out our faith this week, may we strive to be generous with our love and welcome. May it be so as we seek to build the kingdom of God in this time and place. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In Exodus 32:26 the call is given, "*Whoever is for the Lord, come to me*". When have you heard this call in your life? How did you respond? In what ways are you hearing the call now? How will you respond?
- 2) *Pray*. Recall when Jesus first called you to the banquet. What finally made you respond? Pray for the opportunity to use this experience to help another hear God's call to the banquet.
- 3) *Study*. The way we dress or the company we keep can be one of many things that affect our ability to share the invitation to faith in Jesus Christ. Reflect upon who and what you are. What could change that would better allow you to be a part of building the kingdom of God?