

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost • October 11-12, 2008
St. John's Lutheran Church
Rev. John S. Meehan
Matthew 22:1-14

Back to Basics: How Do I Grow My Faith?

Back in the summer when this fall preaching series, "Back to Basics," was in the planning stages, few if any of us realized the financial crisis our nation would be facing in mere months. Over the past week, stories and interviews, articles and editorials in print, TV, and on-line have painted a pretty grim picture of things. Wall Street has had its worst week ever, and complex financial concepts like credit-default swaps and subprime mortgages have become household terms. When the President of the United States addresses the nation at 8:00 am on a Saturday morning, as he did yesterday, you know things are not looking good. And we are yet to feel the repercussions of what all of this will mean. In preparing for today's message, the title of which is "How do I grow my faith?", the thought occurred to me that with where things are in the national and global economy, perhaps a more pressing question is "How do I grow my retirement savings, my 401(k), my 403(b)?" And not even grow it, but just maintain it - keep it from going into freefall so that there is something to live on when all of this is over. And so, in light of everything happening in the world around us right now, by God's divine providence the title of today's message may be more appropriate now than ever. In such times as we are living in, how do I grow my faith? May God's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

How do I grow my faith? In truth, we don't do the growing, that is the work of the Holy Spirit. We can, however, put ourselves in a position so that the Spirit can do his growth work in our lives, and this begins by accepting God's invitation. That's where Jesus' parable in today's Gospel comes in. This is now the third in a series of parables Jesus tells. The first is the parable of the two sons in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32), the second is the parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-45). We've heard both of these parables over the last two weeks. All three parables, including today's, tell the story of invitation and rejection, and the consequences of that rejection. God urgently invites all people to come to the banquet he has prepared. This is an image of the kingdom of God, of eternal life and salvation. It's an image used frequently in Scripture to picture what God's kingdom is like: a lavish banquet and a grand celebration. Growing our faith begins by accepting God's invitation to the banquet he has prepared. This banquet image comes through loud and clear in today's first Scripture reading (Isaiah 25:1-9) where the Lord God has prepared "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (Is. 25:6). God invites all people to swallow the wonderful feast he has prepared while he himself "will swallow up death forever" (Is.25:7). That banquet image crops up again in Psalm 23, which we read together: "You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over" (Psalm 23:5). Growing in faith begins by receiving, accepting, and rejoicing in God's invitation to come and be his guest at the banquet he has prepared.

Look at what the response is to that invitation in today's Gospel! Some who were invited come up with lame excuses about why they can't come. Some even go so far as to abuse, mistreat, and even murder the messengers of the king. Unbelievable! The Scripture says "they made light of it" (Matt.22:5); the "it" being the king's invitation. They didn't take it seriously. They were too wrapped up in themselves to see the opportunity of a lifetime that was before them. My friends, "We have met the enemy and he is us" (Walt Kelly in "Pogo," 1970). It doesn't take much to see ourselves as those same people in the parable who refused the invitation. We easily become very wrapped up in ourselves and our own concerns, cares, and problems - especially now in these uncertain times. We don't take God's invitation seriously, and are

prone to make light of that opportunity of a lifetime that is before us to come to the banquet of the Lord. This is a call for each one of us to repent; to turn to the Lord.

How do I grow my faith? While it is true we have been invited to God's banquet, it is also true that we are to come dressed for the occasion. This is what so angers the king in the parable when he finds the one man without a wedding garment. True, the man didn't have a lot of time and he was called from off the streets, but he knew where he was going. He had been told to come for a wedding banquet. All those at God's banquet must be attired not in tuxes and formal gowns, but in the righteousness of the King's Son, the One in whose honor the banquet is being held. Nothing we have in our closet will be good enough - only filthy rags there. The King's Son is Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, who has laid down his life for us, who freely gives us the robe of his own righteousness so that we are clothed in the most beautiful garment of all time; robes that have been made washed clean in his own blood.

How do I grow my faith? By accepting and then acting upon that invitation! Growing in our faith means going deeper into that written Word, the Scriptures, which reveal to us the living Word, Jesus Christ. Growing in our faith means receiving with repentant joy that living Word, Jesus Christ, as he comes to us in the banquet at the Lord's table, giving us his true Body and Blood. Growing in our faith means that through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us we see ourselves, others, and the world around us through the eyes of that living Word, Jesus Christ, and willingly - yes, even joyfully - conform our lives to his, living the life of a humble servant, just as he did. Growing in our faith means that we seek out opportunities to share our faith, to speak about Jesus and point others to him, knowing that they are also people for whom Christ gave his life. Growing in our faith means that we are growing in holy habits, just as the early believers did: **"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"** (Acts 2:42). Growing in our faith means that our minds focus on **"whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things"** (Philippians 4:8), as Paul tells us in today's second lesson.

Growing in faith begins with what God in Christ has done for us, accepting his banquet invitation, looking forward to the day when we shall see and touch and taste God's gifts at heaven's feast. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen