

## ***Being Here***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 15, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Matthew 22:1-10

Being Here. That's a decent sermon title. It gives a hint about what I might be talking about this morning without giving away too much. Given its place within this sermon series about "the church as ..." it seems to point to the obvious that "being here" is an important part of being part of the church, being part of the faith community which gathers here on Sundays and other days too. Okay, then. So what the heck does this bizarre parable of Jesus in Matthew have to do with any of that? I mean, this is a pretty dark parable, right? Wedding guests don't show up because they were too busy doing other things. The king sends his army to destroy these ungrateful people and then has his servants scour the countryside to fill the banquet hall with other guests, only for the king to then come to the hall and throw some guy out for not being properly dressed. What the heck???

Well, I have to admit, as I began engaging with this text in preparation for writing this sermon, even I wondered what the heck I was thinking when I chose it. It's a challenging one, for sure. What does it actually mean? What was Jesus trying to say here? To understand this, we have to remind ourselves of the context in which Jesus used this parable as a teaching tool. It is the third of three parables about the same thing – questioning the authenticity and the faith of the people he has come to teach. In this parable, Jesus uses a story that seems like a metaphor we should be able to understand – a wedding banquet or "reception" as we would call it. But then, everything goes off the rails in a horrible way when the invited guests don't show up. It's important to note that it's the king who is giving

the wedding banquet for his son so one would think folks would be excited to be invited to such a special affair which was sure to be lavish in every respect. But, no, the invited guests were too busy to come – some were traveling on business and others just had other things to do. But not only did these guests not come, they took the slaves who had come to bring the invitations and killed them! Killed them! Why? Who gets angry enough to kill someone over receiving an invitation to a wedding reception? It makes no sense! And that, dear ones, is the point. This makes no sense. That’s why it is important to remember that this is a parable – a story intended to serve as a metaphor for some deeper meaning to be found in it. More about that in a bit because the parable continues on beyond this point of slaves bearing wedding invitations being murdered.

Of course the king who sent the slaves is enraged and he does two things as a result. First, he sends his army to destroy the town of the guests who refused the invitation, killing the slaves bringing the invitations. He also sends out more slaves into the countryside to find more guests to come to the wedding and these people all came. Okay. So far, so good. But then even this goes off the rails as the king comes into the wedding reception and sees all the people – the people from everyday life whom he had told his slaves to round up no matter whether they were “good or bad” and is not happy with everyone he sees in the banquet hall. He sees one guy whom he feels is not appropriately dressed and goes up to him saying. “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” The guy was speechless, which is understandable, I think. But the king still isn’t done. He orders the guy bound hand and foot and thrown out into “the outer darkness.” Yikes! What the heck!

Again, important to remember that this is a parable – a story intended as a metaphor to make a deeper point. It’s not really about a

temperamental king and recalcitrant wedding guests. It's about what it means to be authentic and genuine in one's faith and practice. Jesus, by this time in Matthew, was ending his years of itinerant ministry and getting ready for what he knew would be his final journey to Jerusalem. This is an important part of the context for this parable. Remember that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, one of his first actions was to go to the Temple and overturn the tables of the moneychanger, symbols of the religious authorities. By this time, Jesus was getting really frustrated with the religious authorities because he realized that they were more vested in preserving their own power and authority than they were in considering any new possibilities for engaging in relationship with God. Jesus' entire message was the invitation to connect with God in such a way as to have one's life transformed by God's abiding and boundless love for each person. The religious authorities wanted no part of this and did everything they could to undercut Jesus at every turn. This is the reason, I believe, that the imagery in this parable is so violent. The slaves with the invitation to the banquet are murdered by the very people intended to receive the invitations. The king then sends his army to destroy those people and burn their city. He invites different people to the banquet but even then, he is not satisfied and throws one person out because he wasn't dressed appropriately. These are brutal images, the kind of brutality we don't tend to associate with Jesus. And perhaps that's the point of the whole parable – that even God has an end to patience when people continually turn their backs on God over and over again.

Admittedly the final part of the parable is still really confusing as new people are invited but even one of them is deemed unworthy by the king for a reason that to us seems petty – how he was dressed. But was it really about how he was dressed? Or was it about his being

willing to accept the free food without changing anything about who he was? Remember, the parable ends with the words, “many are called but few are chosen.” That’s the crux of the entire parable – that God’s invitations to become part of the community of folks who seek to follow Jesus in a new way of relating to and with God are plentiful. But, in the end, only those who put in the effort will be able to enjoy all that it means to be beloved of God, to be certain of God’s love for us and the new life always possible because we invite Jesus into our lives – and then act on his presence in our lives all the time. Put in the simplest terms, this parable is about realizing that just saying we love God and follow Jesus isn’t enough. It’s about showing up, about being here, all the time, not just when it’s easy or convenient. Not an easy thing to hear or think about for any of us. But, there it is. So, where do we go from here? How are our daily lives affected by all of this?

And that has always been the central question in this parable. How much of ourselves and our lives are we willing to entrust to God? It is the central question of faith. Ironically this past week has unexpectedly been one in which this question has taken an even deeper significance as war with distinct religious overtone has broken out in Israel after a brutal and unprovoked attack on innocent civilians by the terrorist group Hamas. We know now the attack was intentional, well planned and deliberately horrific with women, children and the elderly specifically targeted for brutality we can scarcely bear to consider. Young people attending a music festival were brutally murdered, young women raped, and hostages taken captive for the sole purpose of inflicting as much terror as possible on Israel. That this situation is horrific is beyond question. That such unprovoked attacks are always evil is beyond question. So why then have some well intentioned people seen this as an opportunity to push

back against, and harshly criticize Israel? Is it anti-Semitism or something else?

Well, simply put, I think some people get so invested in one particular cause that they lose sight of the broader issues at play in this kind of truly evil and horrific incident. I am painfully aware that my own alma mater Harvard had student groups which posted an anti-Israel statement while the attacks were still unfolding. My understanding is that it was mainly the student groups on the “Yard,” as Harvard’s undergraduate program is known on campus, but I have little doubt the Divinity School had a role in it as well. I say this because I know there are pro-Palestinian groups at the Div School. They view Israel’s refusal to engage in meaningful negotiations to create a Palestinian homeland in Gaza or the West Bank as its own form of terrorism. This, they erroneously felt, gave them the right to make the statements they did in response to the Hamas attack. They were wrong.

This painful situation was described beautifully in an article in *The Atlantic* this past week. Written by Helen Lewis, the article is entitled “The Progressives Who Flunked the Hamas Test.” She begins the article by posing these thought-provoking observations:

THE TERROR ATTACK on Israel by Hamas has been a divisive—if clarifying—moment for the left. The test that it presented was simple: Can you condemn the slaughter of civilians, in massacres that now appear to have been calculatedly sadistic and outrageous, without equivocation or whataboutism? Can you lay down, for a moment, your legitimate criticisms of Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, West Bank settlements, and the conditions in Gaza, and express horror at the mass murder of civilians? In corners of academia and social-justice activism where the identity of the oppressor and the oppressed are never in doubt, many people failed that test.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Lewis, “The Progressives Who Flunked the Hamas Test,” THE ATLANTIC, October 13, 2023.

As the tag line on this article sums up so beautifully, this attack by Hamas “refutes the flawed assumption that all social justice causes fit neatly together.”<sup>2</sup> Clearly, they don’t. She goes on to point out that several of those student groups have now withdrawn their support of those statements, as well they should. But, the damage was done and this is so very sad. The fact that damage has been done by this ill-advised, spontaneous statement is beyond doubt and a lot of people, already brutalized by the Hamas attacks were further brutalized by people who should have known better. This became clear to me on Thursday evening when I had the privilege, along with Christina Brummund and Ed Stratton, of attending the Prayer Service at Congregation Sharah Zedek. It was a lovely and deeply moving service featuring remarks by two Israeli youth who are here in the New London area doing a year of service as “emissaries” from Israel to the Jewish folks here. Their presence at this service was fortuitous for us who heard them speak but I cannot begin to fathom their heartbreak, since both of them had friends at the music festival which was attacked and they do not know whether those friends are alive or dead. They also had visited the kibbutzim also attacked and could visualize those places, only imagining them now with houses and streets running with the blood of the elderly and children. By the time their brief remarks ended they were in tears and holding on to each other for support. They brought the horror of this situation in Israel into sharp focus for me, and everyone who was there to hear them speak. I am so grateful to have heard them and to have participated in the beautiful prayers and songs offered that evening, a moment I will long remember.

Being here. Fully present to the moment and that can be so very difficult to do, especially when we know the moment will reveal some

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

very ugly truths we'd just as soon ignore. The truth is that sometimes being fully present in a moment means being fully present to the horror that moment holds. It's easy to be fully present in moments of joy and beauty. Being fully present to the humanity of the situation when innocent lives are lost due to pure unadulterated evil takes a different kind of strength, a deeper awareness that sometimes life, like in the parable, is just ugly. Being fully present to the ugliness in a given situation can also cause us to do some painful questioning of ourselves and what we hold dear. The reality that pushback against Israel in the immediate aftermath of last weekend's attacks taught many the painful lesson that sometimes it's not about the social justice issues so many of us feel so passionately about. Sometimes it's just about being present, about being here – wherever and with whomever – when the evil and grief is just too raw to do anything else. There will always be more opportunities to discuss and debate these social justice issues, like those of concern in the Middle East. But sometimes all that matters is the pain of the moment and what we can do to alleviate suffering in the wake of sheer brutality, horror and death. Surely evil is always evil. Surely mourning must be honored. Surely existential fear such as Jews around the world now feel is something to be recognized and respected.

You may be interested to know that one of the surprising and even helpful remarks made at Thursday's service came in a statement by Bishop Henning of the Diocese of Providence. He actually offered suggestions as to what all of us can do to show our love and support for our Jewish brothers and sisters in the moment. He suggested that we put a Star of David in our churches to remind ourselves of our solidarity with Israel. He also suggested putting a star of David in one of our windows at home. Another statement from one of the Jewish organizations also announced a blue ribbon campaign which will

officially begin tomorrow, to show we share in Israel's pain. And that dear ones is what this is all about – just showing we share in Israel's pain of this moment, that we are praying for them in this time of overwhelming grief. That we are praying for the release of the hostages and for a just and lasting peace to come to this land Jesus once called home. Being here – sometimes it means holding ourselves to account for believing our own knowledge of a situation is sufficient to justify an unkind response.

Being here. Dear ones, it means so much more than showing up when we receive that invitation to come. It means remembering who and whose we are every moment of every day. We are those who say we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. May we be wise enough to know what that really means, especially in moments when what we say can heal or hurt more than we might appreciate in the moment. Being here. May we always be up to the challenge it holds. Amen.