

“Banquet Seating”

Matthew 22:1-10

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Communion Devotion

Do you like banquets? I sure do! I enjoy the food, atmosphere and fellowship. As a matter of fact, this is a good time to say thanks to our hospitality staff for all their good work at Smoke Rise. No one does banquets better than Lou and her fine crew. We appreciate you!

How would you react if you entered a banquet hall and discovered that the person sitting beside you for the evening was your greatest enemy? Would you request a new seat, leave or reluctantly sit beside this person? Before you answer, listen to what Philip Gulley and James Mulholland have to say about this in their book, If Grace Is True.

They make a point that the image of heaven that Jesus favored was a banquet. Today's text is an example of this for this parable begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son” Matthew 22:2.

In another familiar parable referred to as the Prodigal Son, Jesus said the father's reaction to his lost son's return home was to throw a party. The fattened calf was killed and the celebration began. The kingdom of heaven and joy naturally go together and I am glad.

Gulley and Mulholland make an interesting observation about the seating arrangements at the heavenly banquet awaiting us. Let me share it with you as we prepare our hearts to receive communion.

“I do not know where we will sit at the final banquet, but I suspect I know who will sit on either side of us. On our right side will sit the person whom we have harmed the most. On the left side will be the person that has done the greatest evil to us. **We will be seated between grace received and grace required.**”

When you enter the banquet hall and see who is seated to your left, you may complain that I do not understand what they did to you. You may think that I do not realize how cruel, petty and evil they were; how they showed no remorse. You may stomp your foot and refuse to be seated next to them. You may say that you can never forgive them.

Then, the person to your right will tap you on the shoulder and you will turn and look into the eyes of someone you hurt. You will see someone to whom you were cruel, petty and evil. You will be standing face to face with someone who has every right to refuse to sit next to you. Instead, you will hear them say, ‘I forgive you.’ I hope you will find in that grace the power to turn and forgive.”

After reading Gulley and Mulholland's parable, I realized that we are always between grace received and grace required. Mature believers know this and know when to receive and share the gift of forgiveness.

This was one reason I held Pope John Paul II in high esteem. I thought he balanced the pursuit of justice and grace as well as any leader in our world.

The same man that condemned Communism in his native Poland and the entire Eastern Bloc Nations apologized for the Inquisition and the Crusades, becoming the first pope to visit a mosque. In 1998, he released the document, “We Remember,” expressing apologies for the church's silence during the Holocaust. In 2000, he prayed at Jerusalem's Western Wall and visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, publicly asking for forgiveness.

This man of peace that repeatedly condemned violence was himself the target of an assassin's bullet in 1981. Two years later, he visited his assailant, Mehmet Ali Agca in prison to let him know that he had forgiven him.

I think the former pope modeled grace received and grace required very well. I thank him for this.

How well do you model it? Are you better at receiving grace or giving it? Do you acknowledge the need to do one but ignore the other?

Do you need to be released from guilt and shame this morning? Do you need to quit berating yourself over mistakes? Do you need to participate in a homecoming celebration of forgiveness and new life? Do you need to receive God's grace and others' forgiveness?

On the other hand, do you need to release a grudge and let go of the desire for revenge? Do you need to quit hating and hoping bad things come to those that hurt you? Do you need to bless those that persecute you?

Grace received and grace required- think about this as we take communion. Ask God to reveal what you need to work on and give you the ability to do so. As you do, remember the one that perfectly modeled God's grace in a graceless world, culminating with those powerful words on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."